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Edited by Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta

THE ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF PHILOSOPHY AND IMPROVISATION IN THE ARTS

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II Art and Improvisation: Aesthetical, Ethical, and Political Perspectives
III Improvisation in Musical Practices
IV Improvisation in the Visual, Narrative, Dramatic, and Interactive Arts

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Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta

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Note

1 The mission of this cultural center is the theory, practice, and teaching of artistic improvisation. The Exploratorium is also home to the editorial staff of *Improfil*, the German journal specialized in the theory and practice of improvised music.

INTRODUCTION

Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta

1 Why This Handbook?

This handbook is devoted to philosophical issues concerning artistic improvisation. As "an aspect of the broader human condition" (Lewis and Piekut 2016: vol. 1, 22), and indeed of "human rationality" (Bertinetto and Bertram 2020),[1] improvisation has been the subject of philosophical inquiry since the pioneering writings on the subject offered, among others, by Vladimir Jankélévitch (1955), Gilbert Ryle (1976), Jean-François de Raymond (1980), and Michel De Certeau (1980). In recent years, improvisation has been the focus of philosophical studies extending beyond the domain of arts and aesthetics,[2] becoming common currency in essays on anthropological, neurological, cognitive, sociological, psychological, pedagogical, political, organizational, managerial, and urbanistic issues.[3] This has, in turn, infused new approaches into research on improvisation in the arts, moving away from traditional examinations of its practice in music, dance, and theater, toward scientific, pedagogical, psychological, social, political, and ethical topics pertaining to a variety of different arts.[4]

The number of philosophical studies dedicated to improvisation in various artistic practices and disciplines is growing rapidly, and it is not possible to offer here a complete survey of the literature. However, for the aims of the present volume, special mention must go to *The Oxford Handbook of Improvisation in Dance*, edited by Vida L. Midgelow (2019), and to *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, edited by Georg Lewis and Benjamin Piekut (2016). While the first offers a series of contributions on improvisation in dance – some with a philosophical focus concerning ethics or aesthetics, or by adopting a phenomenological or scientific-cognitive approach – the second is the most important editorial accomplishment regarding improvisation studies to emerge in recent years. Culturally linked to studies on improvisation carried out at Columbia University by George Lewis, and to the research group of the University of Guelph responsible for the publication of the journal *Critical Studies in Improvisation*, the two volumes of this monumental handbook present a wide range of studies covering the most diverse fields: cultural studies, urbanism, sociology, organizational research, philosophy, improvisation in non-Western music and avant-garde music, improvisation among animals and in nature, technology, creativity, artificial intelligence, and role-playing games, to name just a few. The editors' introduction remains a key reference text for orienting oneself in improvisation studies at an interdisciplinary level.

How, then, does the *Routledge Handbook of Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts* differ from its forerunners? Our aim is twofold: to be interdisciplinary and to maintain a narrow focus - namely, to present *philosophical investigations on artistic improvisation in a variety of artistic practices*. In other

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words, the contributions to this volume are concerned specifically with the arts, the field where the notion of *improvisation* was born, developed, and continues to flourish.

That improvisation in the artistic field played a significant role even in ancient Greece is evidenced by the fact that in the *Poetics* Aristotle argues that poetry owes its origin to improvisation (ἐκ τῶν αὐτοσχεδιασμάτων).[5] The Latin term "*improvisus*" (i.e. "unforeseen") is mentioned by Cicero (see Cicero 2002: 52). The use of the notion slowly moved from the domain of rhetoric, in which it was traditionally at home – signifying the capacity to speak on the fly ("ex tempore dicendi facultas": Quintilian 1921: 10.7.1) – to the realm of artistic practices (above all theatre and music), in which during the Renaissance period it settled. The Italian and Spanish dictionary of Lorenzo Franciosini (1707) defines improvisation as the practice of "composing verses without thinking about them." Subsequently the notion came to indicate the composition of dialogues in the moment, such that, in 1750, the playwright Carlo Goldoni could adopt it for his comic theater, calling the *Commedia dell'Arte* the "commedia all'improvviso" ("improvised comedy"). The practice, and the notion, became popular in the realm of poetry (see Esterhammer 2008) and, since the improvised recitation of poetic verses was usually accompanied by music, the term came also to mean "composing music while performing," a meaning adopted by other languages, including English. Thus, the historical meaning of the term became linked especially to the performing arts.

From the arts, the notion of improvisation moved to the sphere of everyday life, referencing certain (still heterogenous) kinds or ways of acting, such as: "A spontaneous action where one acts in an unforeseen way" (Levinson 2010: 213); habitual and routine ways of action learned through practice and automatized to different extents (like driving cars and riding bicycles); makeshift, expedient, and "making-do"; unprepared and unpremeditated reactions to unexpected emergencies; and conscious invention and ideation through execution and realization, including through reshuffling and recycling pre-existing materials.

Improvisation is a kind of agency that is structured and, at the same time, capable of adapting to changes in its surroundings. Accordingly, it is sometimes conceived of as the model of human action as such (cf. Preston 2013). Furthermore, even natural evolution, culture, gender, and the private sphere can be understood as improvisational processes (cf. Butler 2004; Hallam and Ingold 2009; Nachmanovitch 2019). Nevertheless, it is in artistic and other creative practices that improvisation is of the greatest importance. Given that improvisation is, in general, a mode of action where success is not guaranteed, and given the mostly harmless character of failure in the arts – where they are usually not as disastrous as they might be in scientific, social, and political experiments – art remains the ground most conducive to the flourishing of improvisational practices. This makes improvisation in the arts also the most fertile ground for philosophical reflection and analysis of related ontological, phenomenological, ethical, and aesthetic issues.

For this reason, this handbook combines a focus on the arts - encompassing both performing and non-performing art - with philosophical inquiry. Among the questions asked are the following: How might we articulate the notion and grasp the phenomenon of improvisation in different artistic practices and from different philosophical perspectives? What are the ontological and phenomenological properties of improvisation in the arts? What are the peculiarities of improvisation in terms of creativity, artistic normativity, and aesthetic taste and judgment? What are the specific features of the aesthetic experience of artistic improvisations? How does improvisation develop in relation to the specific media and procedures of each artistic practice? What is the contribution of improvisation to the artistic sphere as a whole? What is the aesthetic, moral, social, and political import and impact of the art of improvisation?

Rather than propagating the aesthetic, anthropological, moral, cultural, or socio-political assumptions and clichés about improvisation that are widespread in this field – such as assumptions about the spontaneous, irreversible, unrepeatable, anti-normative, or democratic quality of improvisation, or presuppositions about the coincidence of process and product, or the deviation

from rules, conventions, and habits – the studies collected in this handbook offer precise, extensive, and well-informed investigations on specific aspects of different forms of artistic improvisation, drawing on contemporary as well as historical artistic practices. Moreover, as an implicit endorsement of our belief that improvisation is a universal artistic resource and ideal, as well as a significant dimension of human action as such – one might say, a key expression of what it means to be human – this handbook is not limited to Western art, but also addresses other artistic traditions. Thus the approach of this volume, though strongly philosophical, remains open to historical, social, and empirical questions. Finally, while some contributions adopt the lens of analytic philosophy, others draw on philosophical traditions such as pragmatism, hermeneutics, phenomenology, cultural studies, and critical theory. In fact, one of the driving ideas of this handbook is that the conceptual richness and variety of the phenomena associated with improvisation requires a wide-ranging analysis, which calls for insights from heterogeneous philosophical approaches that can illuminate their subject from distinct perspectives, and in doing so, expand and deepen the reader's knowledge and understanding.

The Handbook is organized into two parts and four sections. The two sections of the first part are dedicated, respectively, to theoretical investigations of artistic improvisation – particularly focused on ontology and phenomenology – and to aesthetic aspects of improvisational arts and their ethical and political meanings and effects. The two sections of the second part are dedicated to music and to a diverse range of other arts. The reason why a whole section is dedicated to improvisation in the musical arts is self-explanatory: as recognized by many experts on the subject, music and music studies have long had a leading role in the field of improvisation practices (Lewis and Piekut 2016: vol. 1, 21). This is demonstrated by, among other things, the great number of publications devoted to traditional and new forms and technologies of musical improvisation, emerging not only in the final decades of the previous century, but also in very recent years.[6] While Section 3 seeks to do justice to the preeminence of improvisation in music, we supplement this focus with a series of contributions, collected in Section 4, on other performing arts, installation art, and also arts rarely associated with improvisation - such as painting, sculpture, photography, poetry, literature, architecture, and design - and even practices not always considered artistic, including culinary aesthetics and gastronomy as well as games such as role-playing games and videogames.

No doubt, many chapters could have been placed in different sections than those we have chosen; to some degree, the organizational structure of such a handbook is itself the result of mindful improvisation. As editors we take full responsibility for any perceived inconsistencies; nevertheless, we hope that our choice of structure offers the reader a tool to navigate the works collected herein and appreciate their contents.

2 Philosophy and Improvisation in the Arts

Only a few decades ago, the practice of improvisation could still have been described as a neglected topic in much of the literature on the arts and philosophy (Nettl and Russell 1998); but since then matters have changed significantly. The role of improvisation in the arts, primarily in music and the performing arts such as dance and theater, is now widely recognized, thanks, in part, to many of the contributors to the present volume. The very meaning of the practices of improvisation and their artistic, cultural, and social import are studied in a scientifically informed way at both a historical and theoretical level. Nor are the philosophy and the aesthetics of improvisation any longer a novelty. In this regard, this handbook consolidates, reflects on, and extends existing research trends, while also providing new perspectives and opening new fields of research.

In the following pages we sketch some of the main topics discussed in the various chapters of this handbook. (For a short description of each contribution, see Section 3). From the theoretical point of view, a first key issue concerns art improvisation's *ontology*. While the main ontological

models adopted for the performing arts usually (though this handbook picks out interesting exceptions) distinguish between the work (as an artistic object) and its performances (as its realization), improvisation seems to conflate work and performance. As a consequence, the idea is widespread that, in improvisation, invention and realization as well as process and product coincide. This is true, but only to a certain point, given that not everything in improvisation is invented on the spot. Improvisers usually *know how* to dance, play an instrument, recite, etc., and improvisation follows the conventions and rules of the artistic practice and genre to which it belongs, while also appealing to pre-prepared materials for realizing a performance that can count as improvisation on the whole. Furthermore, it is possible to distinguish between the process of improvising and its result – so much so that audio-video recordings can give us access to the product after the production process has ended. This, moreover, occurs quite as a matter of course when improvisation is at work in arts such as painting, sculpture, and literature – here observers and readers perceive the result of improvisation, not its process.

On closer inspection, many of the ontological qualities ascribed to improvisation (e.g., situationality, unrepeatability, ephemerality, fragility, and uniqueness) seem to be ontological properties of all events, including performative interpretations of musical, theatrical, and dance pieces (Ruta 2017), and not exclusively of improvisations. Conversely, the specific aesthetic qualities of improvisation do not depend solely on its link to "the moment" and its unrepeatability. As the relevance of improvisation in non-performing arts shows, improvisation does not always coincide with performance in the sense of a live event shared between artists and the public. Still, it remains true that artistic improvisation is particularly marked by its occurrence in so-called "real time" – a notion that surely is as philosophically interesting as it is questionable. Improvisatory creativity unfolds through the interactions that occur in the situation of its unfolding: the interplay between the performers, the relationship with the audience, and the interaction with the performative situation. Whether it is *intentional* improvisation or *reactive* improvisation (*impromptu*, as Lydia Goehr calls it [Goehr 2016]), acting responsively and appropriately with respect to the moment in which it takes place is a distinguishing mark of the artistic sense of improvisation. What is achieved can be unexpected even for the improvising artist, who is stuck in an "epistemic paradox" – they *know how to do*, but *do not know what they will do* (Bertinetto 2016a). Thus, the artistic normativity of the improvised work emerges, in part, during its formation – to the point that the very notion of *mistake* becomes interestingly problematic (Bertinetto 2016b).[7]

Many other theoretical questions arise in relation to these themes. Besides the crucial question of whether improvisation (in art and in other human practices) can truly be said to occur at all, or is rather only an ideal and/or artistic goal, some of the issues at stake in the philosophical debates (e.g., in aesthetics, theoretical philosophy, and the cognitive sciences) are the following:

- explaining the cognitive, decisional, bodily, and interactive processes of improvisational action, and understanding their development;
- clarifying the relationship between improvisational action and its preconditions (such as cultural conventions; artists' competence, preparation, and embodied knowledge; as well as the material resources of an artistic practice);
- illuminating the specific nature of improvisational creativity, which ensues both from imitation and invention, thereby investigating notions like "spontaneity," "unpredictability," "novelty," "inspiration," and "virtuosity," which are traditionally related to it;
- accounting for the possibility of simulating or feigning an improvisation;
- describing the phenomenological and temporal structures of the production and experience of artistic improvisations;
- discussing whether, and how, is it possible to perceive the improvisational nature of a performance and, especially, to perceive the expressive qualities of improvised art;

- analyzing the specific character of the experience of improvised art and explaining its link with particular aesthetic moods, attitudes, and items (trust, choice – or avoidance of choice[8] – risk, expectation, surprise, wit, humor, wonder, etc.); and
- reflecting on the link between the work and its improvised performances, as in the performance of a Jazz Standard.

With respect to this last question in particular, two approaches compete in contemporary debates on the philosophy of art. According to the first approach, which is based on an ontological model of a structural kind,[9] improvisation is an "odd" case: either it is a sort of deviation from the metaphysical rule according to which performances (such as musical performances) are *tokens* of an immutable normative *type* (the work) that repeatedly instantiate the type as indicated in the score (Dodd 2012; 2014), or it is a practice in which there are no works at all, but only *playings* (Kania 2011). The second approach, conversely, considers improvisation the very model of the ontology of art. Accordingly, the retroactive and autopoietic normativity of improvisation, whereby the sense of improvisation emerges from the performative interactions that shape it, is paradigmatic for the ontology of art in general. Artworks and performances are embedded in changing cultural practices. Hence, the interpretation, say, of a musical work does not repeat it; rather, performances realize works, thereby contributing to (trans)forming them (cf. Feige 2014; Bertinetto 2016a, and, in the same vein, Eric Lewis' (2019) "afrological"[10] proposal).

Another important debate concerns improvisational *creativity*.[11] On the one hand, there are those who conceive of improvisation as the application of the general case of artistic creativity, understood as the realization of an intentional plan. On the other hand, there are those who argue that artistic creativity does not proceed on the basis of pre-established projects and intentions to be put into practice, and that the artwork results from interactions between artists, the materials they use, and the situation in which they work. In this view, it is precisely because improvisers are not authors fully in control of their work that improvisational practices draw attention toward the work's contingent materiality and situatedness. This is what makes improvisation the epitome of artistic creativity, while also constituting a significant feature in common with the aesthetics of performativity.

Of course, the debate on the *aesthetics* of improvisation and on the ethical and political issues connected to it is lively and not limited to the topic of artistic creativity. It is fair to say that neither the Romantic idea of inspired, genius-like creativity, which has governed the aesthetics of improvisation since at least Mme de Stael, nor Adorno's aesthetic prejudice about improvisation as a static standardized and repetitive pseudo-artistic practice (Adorno 1990) are now considered viable aesthetic frameworks for understanding the arts of improvisation. Both are heirs of an aesthetic ideology in which improvisation was the exceptional case or a minor practice: banal entertainment rather than authentic art. In the contemporary debate, the two main philosophical approaches to improvisational aesthetics (or to the aesthetics of the unexpected) revolve around the "*aesthetics of imperfection*" and the "*aesthetics of success*." Starting at least from Ted Gioia's landmark 1988 book on jazz, the first approach has had and still has several supporters (e.g., Brown et al. 2018). Its point is roughly this: as shown in particular by the case of jazz, artistic improvisation, due to its particular ontological dimension, has specific aesthetic features that distinguish it from other artistic practices regulated by canons of beauty and formal perfection. In particular, improvisation is, as the stereotype goes, characterized by the coincidence of process and product and by the impossibility of correction, thus relying on aesthetic and expressive aspects far from those in force in artistic manifestations not dependent on the adventures and happenstances of creation in the moment. However, the aesthetics of imperfection do not only concern improvisation, but rather artistic performances as such, which are consigned to the contingency that characterizes, at least potentially, every event.

The second approach, the "*aesthetics of success*," was theorized in the aesthetics of the 20th century by Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson's "theory of formativity" (Pareyson 2010).[12] According to Pareyson, art is a kind of making that invents the way of making while making. Apart from the decidedly more optimistic flavor of the label "success" as opposed to "imperfection," the idea is that every work and every artistic performance configures its normativity in a self-referential way. This is what Luhmann (2000: 246) described as the "self-programming of art" – a feature recognized and demanded by the aesthetics of autonomy developed in the late 18th century by authors such as Karl Philipp Moritz, Johann Wolfgang Goethe, and Immanuel Kant (cf. Landgraf 2011). This does not mean that the artists in their making, and the public in its reception, do not refer to cultural, artistic, and aesthetic rules, conventions, or procedures, but rather that the *normative force* of such conventions, procedures, and rules is shaped by their application – i.e., through the work or performance – in a (trans)formative and situational way. Depending on the constraints of specific artistic practices, failure may ensue from a different kind of shortcoming – such as lack of novelty, weak technical skills, poor interplay, or formal triviality. There are, however, no criteria the respect of which guarantees the success of a work or performance; aesthetic criteria are, in fact, (trans)formed through/by the work or the performance. The lack of pre-established guarantees of success is the very condition for the possibility of the artistic (situational and concrete) success of the artwork (see Bertram 2018). On this basis it is easy to see that improvisation – as a modality of artistic production and artistic performance – neither is necessarily characterized by a *specific* aesthetic dimension, which is in turn responsible for the peculiar expressive properties of an artistic practice (although sometimes it *is* to be articulated aesthetically in this way: on the "expressive specificity of jazz," see Levinson 2015: 131–43), nor is it necessarily to be understood as a phenomenon *always* apart from usual consolidated artistic practices and experiences. Indeed, improvisation can become the model of a *social aesthetic* (Born et al. 2017), while its specific aesthetic qualities may also be seen as *paradigmatic* of art *per se*, as eminently exemplifying the aesthetics of success (cf. Bertinetto 2021). One may think, in particular, of features like: the emerging character of the artistic sense of an artwork as well as its novelty and originality; the formative power of the present situation and one's dedication to the moment in which the improvisation is taking place, as well as the attitude of experimental imaginative curiosity directed towards aesthetic discoveries and inventions (both of which involve both the artists and the public); and expressive authenticity as responsiveness – not only on the part of the artists, but also as encoded in the artwork itself – towards the situation in which the art is produced. These are among the qualities to be considered guides for understanding the aesthetic experience of art as such in its multiple and culturally evolving dimensions.

Moreover, due to its power of generating its own normativity (Bertram 2010) – which complicates the naive assumption of improvisation as transgression of rules and testifies, rather, to the relationship between improvisation and practices such as recycling and collage – artistic improvisation might be considered the performance or the enactment of Kantian aesthetic judgment (Peters 2017; Bertinetto and Marino 2020). In short, on this model, the "grammar of contingency" implemented in improvisation performances and works may be conceived of as quintessential for the practice(s) and experience(s) of the arts.[13]

Many of the chapters of this handbook discuss and problematize these themes in different ways, showing the richness of the aesthetic perspectives disclosed by philosophical reflection on the practices of artistic improvisation. Similarly rich in scope, theoretical depth, and variety are the ethical, moral, and political reflections elicited in the improvisational artistic field. On the one hand, it is undeniable that, even in arts not traditionally understood as performative, improvisation is characterized by the specific modality and dimension of a type of *acting* – and the world of action is always entangled in ethical, social, and political questions. On the other hand, many of the values and/or qualities of improvisation are also important moral, ethical, and political issues.

Examples of this kind are freedom, authenticity, responsiveness, sensitivity to the right moment (when "one cannot at first see the solution and then, suddenly, one sees it – *in the moment*": Goehr 2016: 474); judgment in the application of a norm to a concrete situation (*phronesis*); the practical intelligence capable of exploiting a situation to its advantage (*metis*); the configuration and expression of personhood through actions and deeds; the methods of organizing a collectivity through joint actions of a collaborative or competitive kind; and, surely, the utopian or *eu*topian ideals of some artistic improvisational movements.

Therefore, improvisation seems capable not only of exemplifying[14] moral or political contents (in reference to jazz specifically, see Hagberg 2008), but also of relating art and society in a transformative way, while questioning and sometimes overcoming the separation between art and reality that dominated the Western aesthetic ideology between the 18th and 20th centuries and that is still dominant in certain sectors of the study of the philosophy of art today. Improvisation's capacity to overcome, or at least to question, the dichotomy between art and life, thereby stressing the political relevance of artistic practices, is not least due to its power of performative self-reflection through which artistic production is exhibited in its product as real actual making, and in which the public not only interacts with the performers, but is involved as a co-performing partner *within* the work. The aesthetic meaning and value of an artist's action as regards the improvisational work of art is certainly questionable; and yet it seems undeniable that artistic improvisation is an emblematic case for the exercise of a participatory (Bourriaud 2002) and transformative (Fischer-Lichte 2008) aesthetics, which also penetrates into the everyday sphere.

These issues reveal the artistic and theoretical fruitfulness of philosophical investigations of the notion of improvisation and of improvisational artistic practices. Yet, as shown by the chapters of this handbook, they are not the only issues that will concern us. The contributions to this volume develop philosophical approaches to the arts of improvisation in ways that are both original and well informed, combining historical with theoretical insights that open new research perspectives and fill voids in the existing literature on improvisation. As editors, we are sincerely grateful to the authors who have contributed to this volume. It is thanks only to their competence and intelligence, and their unflagging willingness to collaborate with us in a period as difficult as that of the COVID-19 pandemic, that it was possible to gather together the highly illuminating insights it is our pleasure to share in this handbook.

3 Overview of Sections and Contributions

As indicated above, the approach of this volume is interdisciplinary in at least three respects: (a) its chapters concern different artistic practices; (b) it is both *theory* and *praxis focused*; and (c) it includes approaches that draw both on analytic and continental philosophy. Consequently, the Handbook presents several *dissonances*, in terms of topics treated, vocabulary employed, and strategies of argumentation. Such dissonances are intentionally left unresolved, as the Handbook does not aim to present a neutral and/or synthetizing view about improvisation, but wants rather to offer a rich and detailed overview of the diverse philosophical research on improvisation in the arts. This research is characterized by the heterogeneity of topics treated, traditions referred to, vocabulary employed, arguments developed, and methodologies adopted. The heterogeneity of approaches is reflected in every section.

In Section 1, *Art and Improvisation: Theoretical Perspectives*, artistic improvisation is investigated along several theoretical directions. The chapters here deal with the specific ontological status of improvisation through theoretical notions such as "resonance" and "orientation," and draw connections with action theory and philosophical topics such as "creativity" and "normativity."

Normativity is at the heart of Georg Bertram's contribution. Bertram approaches the ontology of improvisational performances through the innovative notion of "norm in statu nascendi." His main point is that, by definition, in spite of the possible employment of existing material or

stylistic patterns, improvisational performances do not follow pre-constituted norms; rather, they develop their own specific – and therefore autonomous – normativity through different kinds of interactions developed in the course of the performance. Analogously, making use of notions such as "radical improvisation" and "resonance," Giovanni Matteucci focuses on the articulation of expressive forms in the event of improvisation. Radical ("free") improvisation is conceived as the coming into existence of a form through its materialization. "Resonance," a concept taken from Merleau-Ponty (and nowadays extensively treated by Hartmut Rosa), concerns the aesthetic experience of attending to a radical improvisation by reacting to, or inhabiting, what happens without pre-formed expectations, in a kind of living vibration.

Caterina Moruzzi grounds her ontology of improvisation in her "Musical Stage Theory," according to which every performance must be viewed as a different musical work. Hence, when speaking of musical work as a repeatable entity, we actually denote a "collection of performances, related through a repeatability-relation" (51). Thereby, the break between works and performances is overcome. In this respect, artistic improvisation is paradigmatic for the ontology of art as a whole. This point is extended thereafter to new forms of artistic improvisation, including human-robot interactions.

A central aspect of the ontology of improvisation is its relation to composition, the subject of Robert Valgenti's contribution. Following the path opened by Luigi Pareyson, Valgenti argues that improvisation is to be considered neither as opposed to composition, nor as a specific form of composition, but rather as an element always at work in any composition: namely, one that allows a movement between the artist's personal style and the possibilities opened by the existing artistic material. Another view of the matter is offered by Daniel Martin Feige, who explores the connection between improvisation and composition in jazz. Finding a *tertium datur* between the notion of a Jazz Standard as *thin* musical work and ontologies conceiving single performances as musical works, Feige performs a paradigm shift in jazz ontology. He argues that each performance of a Standard retroactively transforms it and that this is the reason why the Jazz Standard figures as the paradigm for the general notion of musical work. Thereby the notion of musical work (and generally of artwork) acquires processual connotations, related to its historical constitution.

Such connotations, however, can also relate to the single performance-output. The main aim of Marcello Ruta's contribution consists in proposing the use of the notion of "orientation" as a hermeneutical tool with which to analyze key aspects of improvisational performances. After an initial investigation of the relationship between these two notions (orientation and improvisation) as articulated in five common symptoms, he essays an application of this approach in the specific domain of free improvisation, the notion of which is also an object of his analysis. Ruta's focus on orientation paves the way for discussing the relation between improvisation, on the one hand, and process and action, on the other. Claus Beisbart's chapter discusses improvisation in action-theoretic terms, that is, from the perspective of a more encompassing philosophy of action, like that of Michael Bratman. The key point developed in his contribution is that improvisation precludes comparatively specific prior plans as to how to do something. Applying this proposal to artistic performances, Beisbart obtains a picture of artistic improvisation (*qua* performance) that sits well with pre-theoretical intuitions, while also defying conceptions in vogue in the literature. Similarly, Pierre Saint-Germier and Clément Canonne challenge the dominant thesis according to which the focus of artistic appreciation of improvisation is not the final product, but rather the performance as the improvisers' action. Their move is to consider the very *product* of an improvised performance *as a process*, the aesthetic qualities of which cannot be reduced to syntactical relations among artistic materials (such as sounds, expressive gestures, and the like), but should be located in the unfolding performance.

The last chapter of this first part again tackles the topic of normativity, which opened the section, through studying the link between art and law in relation to the temporality of improvisation.

Drawing on the philosophies of Henri Bergson and Jacques Derrida, Sara Ramshaw's contribution explores the (real) time of attentive listening as it pertains to both justice and art. Uniting theorists of attunement, such as Nathan Crawford and Lisbeth Lipari, with Bergson, Ramshaw calls for a more dynamic and vibrant conception of improvisatory time in art and justice as attunement in duration. In doing so, she aims to rethink the *real-timeness* of improvisation as an (imperfect) listening to otherness, which, in its openness, enables both creativity and social change.

Section 2, *Art and Improvisation: Aesthetical, Ethical, and Political Perspectives*, examines the connection between the aesthetic dimension of improvisation and ethical-political topics such as its potential emancipative power and its conception as supposedly free action and participative social practice. Reflections on the aesthetics of improvisation often aim to identify and discuss specific traits that are appreciated in improvised performances and artworks, thereby examining the experience of artistic improvisation in aesthetic and ethical as well as political terms.

David Davies's contribution defends the view that improvisations might be appreciated for their "pure" *aesthetic* properties, as well as for the properties they have because of their improvisatory origin. Accordingly, one should appreciate "the ways in which the performer(s) respond(s) to such things as opportunities for creativity, so that a 'mistake' is no longer seen as such in the overall context of the performance" (154). Therefore the specific artistic character of improvisation seems to rely particularly on the generation of the criteria for its aesthetic judgment on the spot. Improvised performances not only induce aesthetic judgment, however; they also can be transformative experiences. In her contribution, Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that the transformative power of art in performance becomes effective in particular because of the emergence of the unforeseen, which is due, to a great extent, to the autopoietic feedback loop between actors and spectators. Improvised performances, as the *staging of the unforeseen par excellence*, thereby seem to eminently exemplify an aspect of performance, only to be experienced by recipients who, in Goethe's words, see themselves as "travellers who visit foreign places and lands" (168).

In his contribution, Andy Hamilton differentiates between improvisation as spontaneous creation, as commonly understood in the aesthetic domain, and "making do," as commonly understood in the more general domain of human action, where improvisation relates mainly to actions undertaken under unforeseen emergency situations. In this respect, the notion of "making do" applies not only to improvisations, but to live performances more generally. Accordingly, an *aesthetic of imperfection* seems to be applicable also to non-improvised performances. But how is the specific aesthetic import of improvisation to be understood? Christoph Haffter argues that it can be articulated in a series of predicates, like "liveness" and "unpredictability." Those predicates are appreciated in their aesthetic specificity, and can, therefore, possibly be exemplified also by non-improvised artistic performances. On the other hand, those properties, as rooted in historically and culturally situated specific artistic materials, can be differently appreciated each time – what two centuries ago could appear as unpredictable, can nowadays sound, paradoxically, like a cliché.

A key topic for the aesthetics of artistic (and in particular musical) improvisation is that of expressiveness. In this regard, Philip Alperson, who has authored many influential publications on the philosophy of musical improvisation, starts his investigation with an analysis of an improvised solo by jazz saxophonist Phil Woods where Woods apparently "fluffs" a note. Alperson argues that musical performances, as eminently shown by improvisations, should not be evaluated independently from their expressive value. The question whether Woods's "fluffed" note is a mistake is misguided; rather, the musical event is to be regarded as the result and reflection of an expressive commitment of the performance. Expressiveness is also at the center of Garry Hagberg's contribution. Hagberg considers "authenticity as self-expression" paramount for identifying the specific aesthetics of improvisational artistic practices. Leaning on Nietzsche's and Sartre's philosophical approaches, as well as on an analysis of Thelonious Monk's improvised performances, Hagberg argues that authenticity cannot be measured in terms of an adequate externalization of a pre-formed content. In fact, the

content – rather than the presupposition – of an authentic performance is its result. Yet authenticity, in the context of improvisational practices, is not always realized through the affirmation of personal individuality. This, at least, is Franziska Schroeder's point. Her contribution consists both of an analysis of Fernando Pessoa's fragmented and multiple personalities, as well as of an exploration of the notion of multiple subjectivities in the practice of music improvisation. Pessoa's notion of "empty stage," in this respect, allows us to view free improvisation as going beyond the paradigm of intersubjectivity; thus, we might consider improvisers not simply as subjects who communicate through music, but rather as empty stages on which plural configurations of music-playing can develop, where self approaches itself, while also reconfiguring itself and others.

A further significant aspect of the aesthetics of improvisation is its relation to freedom and novelty. In this respect, Daniele Goldoni argues that the ideology of progress, which dominated notated music in the 19th and early 20th centuries, was largely adopted by improvisation later in the 20th century. The most "pure" and "free" improvisational practice in force nowadays was fostered by an idea of innovation central to non-improvised music. Paradoxically, some avant-garde prohibitions against old clichés ended up becoming new "compositional" clichés in improvisation. Goldoni claims a "free" use of some avant-garde linguistic achievements not as "rules" but as means for experience and awareness, thanks to a "porous" (Benjamin) improvisational interaction.

These aesthetic considerations also have *ethical* dimensions. One of them is the "improvisational phronesis" that is the focus of Bruce Ellis Benson's chapter. Here *phronesis* is in opposition to *poiesis* as a practice not geared toward the creation of a product. This distinction has consequences that concern the ethical dimension. Indeed, in contrast to musical practices built upon the notion of musical work, which tend to be hierarchical, directive, and vertical, practices that, like improvisation, are centered on *phronesis* tend to be communal, free, and horizontal; improvisational performances create communities that involve the public in intentionally non-hierarchic ways. A further key aesthetic and ethical quality of improvisation is spontaneity, traditionally connected to concepts like "nature" and "immediate experience." Randy Fertel investigates this issue in his contribution, while also considering the epistemological and ontological import of spontaneity. His main point is that while epistemologically we not only cannot have a guarantee of immediacy, sometimes we have reasons for claiming its impossibility (Fertel refers to Ernst Gombrich's figure of "no-innocent-eye," claiming the non-tenability of the notion of an "immediate experience"). Further, on the ethical side, the appeal to nature as more authentic than reason is rather dubious, as Fertel, referring to John Stuart Mill, astutely observes.

As emerges in Andrea Lorenzo Baldini's and Mathieu Saladin's respective contributions, there are good reasons to talk also about a *political* relevance of the aesthetics of improvisation. According to Baldini's investigation on improvisation in *street art*, the specific connection between improvisational aesthetics and the political import of street art is that, by illegally using public spaces for producing their artworks, street artists are forced to make on-the-spot adaptive aesthetic decisions, pressed as they are by the urgency to leave such places before being caught by the authorities. While Baldini illustrates this notion with reference to a series of videos of graffiti artists in action, Saladin focuses on improvisation workshops organized by the percussionist John Stevens in the late 1960s, thereby maintaining that the political force of the aesthetics of improvisation has further emancipatory aspects. The main point of those workshops was not purely musical, but was also practical, and indeed political and pedagogical; as Saladin observes – comparing Stevens's practice to the Universal Teaching Method elaborated by Jean Joseph Jacotot in the 19th century – they were meant not only to collectively re-affirm a principle of equality between individuals, beyond established divisions between professional and social categories, but also to increase individuals' self-confidence.

Section 3, *Improvisation in Musical Practices*, is specifically dedicated to the musical domain. It provides historical and conceptual perspectives on concrete musical practices, where improvisation plays multifarious roles and takes on very different configurations. This allows us both to

refine our understanding of the subject and to question longstanding assumptions about improvisation that are the result of implicitly accepting improvisatory practices, such as free improvisation, as paradigmatic for the field.

Marc Lewon and Uri Smilansky use the musical practices of the Middle Ages to explore the value of ontological separations not only between the composed and the improvised, but also between the expressive and the functional; the planned and the immediate; the written and the heard; and, perhaps most importantly, between the act and the consumption of improvised music. This challenges the idea of improvisatory universals that are not culture specific. In a similar vein, focusing on vocal music, Livio Marcaletti investigates the notion of "ornamentation," as a way to modulate expressiveness, within the tradition of historical musical improvisation. Their practical and conceptual distinction is in fact the historical result of the evolution of musical notation and the contemporary approach to the musical score. Through a careful analysis of musical treatises of the last four centuries, Marcaletti shows that the conceptual opposition between the "essential" musical text and the "accessorial" improvisational ornament is not self-evident, but should be considered historically contingent.

It seems, then, that the distinction between composition and improvisation only started to make sense in the modern era. But the relationship between the notions of composition and musical work and that of improvisation has always been complex, both practically and theoretically. This complexity also concerns the problem of the alleged decline of the practice of improvisation in 19th- and 20th-century Western music. In this regard, Katrin Eggers and Michael Lehner focus on the progressive decline of musical practice during the 19th century. The chapter shows how improvisation within the classical tradition is conceived as the production of musical performances that have, paradoxically, the appearance of compositions, by achieving an equilibrium between a sense of freedom and formal complexity. It is possibly this ambition that contributed to making improvisation less and less viable, according to the increasing complexity attained by the musical language.

The relationship between improvisation and the musical work is also the subject of Andrew Wilson's chapter. Wilson radically questions a view about improvisation that was dominant in the Western musical tradition, showing on the one hand that improvisation remained an observable phenomenon in various art music contexts of the first half of the 20th century and, on the other hand, that this phenomenon assumed different forms. In order to observe these forms of improvisation, Wilson relies on the post-1950 conception of musical work of art as defined in the science of art music (i.e., *Musikwissenschaft als Kunstwissenschaft*) and which he equates with "that which is not improvisation" (357). In a close cultural context, a specific case is studied by Sabine Feisst. Based on an unmatched knowledge of Arnold Schoenberg's ideas and work, Feisst's contribution provides a provocative theoretical perspective on improvisation, inspiration, and spontaneity. Schoenberg was not known as an improvising performer. But as a friend of George Gershwin, Oscar Levant, Artie Shaw, and many other skilled, improvising musicians, he keenly observed improvisation's aesthetics and theories and did not pit it against composition. Rather, he saw improvisation as "intricately linked with his compositional aesthetics" (374).

A key theoretical question, then, is that of the distinction between improvised performances, traditionally considered unrepeatable, and performances of musical works, traditionally understood as repeatable manifestations of the work. But is unrepeatability a necessary condition of musical improvisation? Based on personal experience of attending a series of improvised performances held in 2005 by the Swiss trio Koch-Schütz-Studer, Thomas Gartmann maintains that the notion of "repetition" can be extended to aspects of a musical performance that are not strictly sonic, like the general layout or the very structure of the event, as repeated free performance events; moreover, video recordings enable the repetition of improvised performances, thereby throwing a different theoretical light on the unrepeatable process, without eliminating its irreducibly contingent character.

"Risk" and "empathy," two notions specifically linked to musical improvisation practices, are at the center of the contributions, respectively, of Tom Arthurs and Deniz Peters. Arthurs discusses this notion of "risk" in the context of contemporary "free" improvisation. Based on interviews with well-known musicians of the Berlin community, Arthurs identifies four strategies to deal with such risk: "Real Improvising," "Tricks and Conscious Interventions," "Pre-Planned Rules and Concepts," and "Composition." This last strategy consists of using musical material composed in advance; while this can be seen as "cheating," since "free" improvisation avoids the use of such material, the chapter interestingly stresses how such strategies were often considered by musicians as artistically valuable. Peters's contribution, based both on his interpersonal musical experience and on philosophical, psychological, and musicological literature, offers an excellent and refined example of artistic research on the role of "empathy" in musical improvisation. Understanding empathy as a condition for realizing the "togetherness" required in collective improvised performances, Peters maintains it is not only a feeling between musicians, but also (and possibly more importantly) "towards the emergent joint music" (421). In this respect, empathy seems to be a *powerful enabler* of both the dialogical and kairological aspects of improvisation.

In the realm of pop-rock music, as tackled in Stefano Marino's contribution, improvisation also plays an important role, presenting several aspects that need to be taken into account. First, Marino discusses the role played by improvisation in the interactions between composition, performance, and recording. Then he focuses on the creative role of "mistakes" and the variety of improvisational practices, ranging from so-called "pseudo-improvisation," which embellishes existing patterns with more or less codified artifices, to forms of free and radical improvisation. Finally, resorting to Richard Shusterman's *somaesthetics*, he stresses that the role played by the body in pop-rock music is a key aspect for the aesthetics of improvisation.

The contributions of Lara Pearson and Ali Jihad Racy, in this section, and that of Carla Bagnoli, in the following section, widen the cultural perspective of the Handbook, offering the readers perspectives on improvisation in Indian, Arab, and Japanese cultures. The relationship between improvisation and composition is again at stake in Pearson's contribution. Through a comparative analysis of Karnatak, jazz, and free improvisation music practices, Pearson maintains that the opposition between improvisation and composition, as well as that between preparation and spontaneity, misconceives what happens in all three improvisational practices. Instead, she proposes that improvisation is better conceptualized as "play within and between pre-existing musical structures" (447), and explores how this concept works also for the improvisations, such as conversation, that occur in everyday life. The intertwining, rather than opposition, between improvisation and composition is also one of the three main aspects of Racy's discussion of improvisational practices in Arab music. Racy first provides some terminological insights about improvisation-related terms in Arabic; second, he shows that in Arab musical performances, no different from other musical practices, composition and improvisation are not opposed but rather interact to different degrees; finally, this interaction is illustrated in a typology, articulated in seven categories.

Section 4, *Improvisation in the Visual, Narrative, Dramatic, and Interactive Arts*, provides a broad overview of the role of improvisation in art forms that have received less attention in the field, as well as in practices not always considered part of the arts, such as cooking and videogames. As they raise philosophical issues concerning artistic practices usually not considered relevant for improvisation, the contributions in this section implicitly defy the traditional – and questionable – distinction between artistic and non-artistic practices.

The section begins with artistic practices where improvisation is traditionally at home: dance, theater, and performance art. The philosophy of dance improvisation is a growing research field, as demonstrated by Eric Mullis's and Carla Bagnoli's chapters. Mullis, endorsing an approach that was, more or less, officially introduced by Erwin Goffman, focuses on the connection between

dance improvisation and everyday practices. First, dance improvisation can foster the acquisition of different kinds of procedural knowledge, related both to the dancer's own body and the external environment. Second, the audience of dance improvisation can recognize in the artistic performance something that they have already possibly experienced. Third, dance improvisation deals with historically and culturally situated habits and embodiments. Through the analysis of *butō* dance, Bagnoli's contribution focuses on action-theoretic and normative aspects of dance improvisation. As Bagnoli argues, in a way antithetical to Beisbart's view, *butō* improvisation is athelic but disciplined. Under this description, it challenges theories of rational action as mediated by intentions, and theories of arational action as expressive of individual subjectivity. Its normativity does not emerge from aesthetic standards or procedures, but builds upon ascetic exercises of "unselfing." A community is generated though the shared experience of the living body.

Another established and important field of research in aesthetics and the philosophy of improvisation is that of theater and performance art. Domenico Pietropaolo analyzes different aesthetic aspects of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, arguing that this classical form of improvisational theater has an ambiguous or two-sided status: codified characters on the one hand, and significant room for improvisation (aided both by memory and imagination) on the other. According to Pietropaolo, Luigi Pareyson's *aesthetics of formativity* (already discussed in Valgenti's chapter, in Section 1) can be an effective hermeneutical tool for understanding such hybrid situations between formal and *impromptu* constraints. Another key issue of the aesthetics of improvisation in the performing arts is precisely the relationship between improvisation and performance. In this regard, taking as a starting point Marina Abramović's performance of *The Artist is Present*, Dieter Mersch aims both to establish connections and mark differences between both notions and practices. While they are connected through the concept of the "unexpected" as well as through their ambiguous ontological status between artwork and event, their specific poietic characters and artistic normativity are responsible for their differences. In this respect, improvisation and performance emerge as two complementary, rather than similar or opposed practices. A particular kind of performative improvisation is discussed by Clément Canonne: improvisation in comedy. The author's question is why comedy, rather than tragedy, is usually associated with improvisation. His answer is that improvisation has an enhancing effect on humor (analyzed through the four traditional accounts of humor: the "superiority," "incongruity," "release," and "play" theories). Moreover, improvisation entails elements – such as potential unpredictability, risk of misunderstanding, and openness to interaction with the public – that are more congenial to comedy than to non-humoristic genres.

Gilles Mouëllic's technically informed discussion on the history of cinematic improvisation opens a series of chapters dedicated to art forms other than the performing arts. According to Mouëllic's analysis, while in its beginnings, improvisation in cinema was mainly centered on the initiatives of actors in front of the camera, a first technological break allowed the rise of the so-called "direct cinema," and, therefore, the possibility of registering in a documentary-like way artists' creative processes. Further progresses in montage techniques and the portability of new devices fostered both individual and collective improvisational practices in movie production.

Drawing in part on Fertel's contribution to this volume, Rob Wallace's chapter undermines the rigid opposition between composition and improvisation in poetry. Poetry can, thus, be read fruitfully as a genre of paradigmatic works that are often improvisatory – even when they are composed. In this respect, and in line with the approach adopted by Haffter, "improvisation itself potentially becomes not only a process of creation but also a process of reception" (565).

What is the relevance of improvisation in the realm of visual arts? This is the general key question variously discussed in the following three chapters. In their contribution, Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta analyze the role of improvisation in painting. Even considering the most radical forms of improvised painting (such as Pollock's *Action Painting,* or its quasi-ancestor

Cozens's *blotting*), key differences remain between improvisational painting and improvisation in the performing arts. In particular, viewers do not need to become acquainted with the improvisational process (the pictorial performance) in order to aesthetically experience the produced painting. Still, as the chapter shows through paradigmatic examples, the aesthetic import of improvisation in painting can be articulated in a series of aesthetic properties.

Alice Iacobone develops two original lines of research to argue for the aesthetic relevance of improvisation in sculpture, thereby broaching a new research field. The first one draws on accounts of sculpture in which a major role is played by the dimensions of tactility and movement, from 18th-century debates up to recent neuroscientific research. The second approach concerns the performative turn in plastic arts. Iacobone shows the fruitfulness of the notion of improvisation for describing not only contemporary sculpture but also sculpture in general.

Similar issues are posed by photography. According to Bertinetto, since photography can be explained as a "situated and responsive practice of im-pro-visation" (600), the analysis of improvisation in photography contributes to understanding photography as human agency, thereby offering valuable insights into the relationship between intentional agency and art. Improvisation is artistically relevant to photography, particularly when the photographic "eye" interacts with the shooting situation, in such a way that the photo enacts a specific "grammar of contingency," in which photography, like performing improvisation, aesthetically appears as in-between action and event.

Improvisation and installation art is the topic of Elisa Caldarola's and Edgar Landgraf's chapters. Based on the concrete example of Sarah Sze, Caldarola focuses on three aspects of improvisation in this relatively new artistic domain: the improvisational quality of the artwork as resulting from the improvisational attitude of the artist, the improvisational artistic experience of the public, and the improvisational processes of the curatorial work. In this regard, through discussion of concrete examples, Caldarola shows that "sometimes artists deliberately leave curatorial teams free to decide how to install their works" (627). Landgraf discusses the *oeuvre* of the artist Erwin Redl and argues that, as a consequence of the active participation of the public, Redl's installations acquire two features that are emblematic of improvisation: radical contingency and materiality. Adopting a post-phenomenological approach, Landgraf shows how Redl's installations are, in fact, events, rather than objects. They reveal the supremacy of the material aspect of perception over the formal ones, confirming the anti-Kantian aesthetic approach that characterizes the works of this Austrian-born artist.

Design, architecture, and urbanism are at stake in Annika Frye's and Paola Berenstein Jacques's chapters. Frye analyzes two main aspects of improvisation in the design process, namely the material and emergent dimension and the participatory and collective character of the design process. "Bricolage" and "adhocism" are the two main notions employed by Frye for the analysis of improvisational design. In fact, improvisational design is, on the one hand, conceived as emerging from the reorganization of existing materials; on the other hand, it is the result of the adaptive re-functionalization of already existing objects created by other individuals in other contexts. Jacques resorts to the very same notions – "bricolage" and "adhocism" – in order to discuss the "precarious form of construction in *favelas* (slums) in Rio de Janeiro" (664). In spite of the general lack of interest in improvisation practices in architecture, possibly motivated by the ordering and controlling import of architecture as such, Jacques shows that both notions can designate, in Michel de Certeau's terms, *tactical* moves within urban spaces, theoretically and practically opposed to the *strategies* articulated by institutional urbanistic approaches.

The last section brings the Handbook to a close with reflections on the role of improvisation in aesthetic practices that have only recently been considered viable forms of artistic expressions. Nicola Perullo focuses on the production and reception aspects of cooking as improvisatory art. On the production side, the realization of a recipe is much more than the result of rule-following: better still, the very notion of rule-following, particularly in this context, involves improvisational aspects. On the gustatory side, creativity and improvisation also play an important role, namely in

the use of imagination for classifying the various properties of food. Finally, Thi Nguyen's chapter is dedicated to role-playing games and videogames. The analysis is developed along two theoretical perspectives: designer-centric and player-centric. As Nguyen argues, neither conception is exhaustive. Games are plural in form and function, and exist on a spectrum between designer-centric and player-centric designs. This young and exciting research field shows, therefore, (at least) two things: while improvisation is not always to be contrasted against design or composition, the rigid distinction between authors and recipients, which for centuries has characterized theoretical reflection about art, can be a matter for discussion and/or rethought. This, then, is a way to reiterate some of the theses formulated in the many contributions to this handbook, with their different theoretical variations and developments. The aesthetics of improvisation can also contribute to a rethinking of traditional categories of the philosophy of art, as well as to artistic practices and procedures that are not explicitly and/or programmatically regulated by the ideal or the goal of improvisational freedom.

Notes

1 Both these dimensions of improvisation have been dramatically illustrated on a global scale by the way in which all of humanity, in order to respond to the COVID-19 emergency, has had to recur to measures that, for reasons not linked to time issues alone, had a de facto improvisational character.
2 To name just a few: Alperson 1984; Bailey 1992; Butler 2004; Ramshaw 2013; Velleman 2009; Herman 2008; Peters 2009; Sennett 2008; Preston 2013.
3 E.g., Ciborra 2002; Gagel 2004; Kurt and Näuman 2008; Berkowitz 2010; Dell 2012; Göttlich and Kurt 2012; Powell 2012; Kazanijan 2016; Asma 2017; Repnikova 2017; Chater 2018; Van Middelaar 2019; Torrance and Shumann 2019; Lösel 2019; Zorzi 2020.
4 See Smith and Dean 1997; Feisst 1995; Nettl and Russell 1998; Hamilton 2000; Benson 2003; Sawyer 2003; Fischlin and Heble 2004; Fischer-Lichte 2004; Sparti 2005; Ferreccio and Racca 2007; Lampert 2007; Hallam and Ingold 2007; Fähndrich 1992–2008; Esterhammer 2008; Solis and Nettl 2009; Gröne et al. 2009; Cafaro 2009; Bormann, Brandstetter and Matzke 2010; Wallace 2010; Santi and Illetterati 2010; Goldman 2010; Sparti 2010; Landgraf 2011; Davies 2011; Rousselot 2012; Drinko 2013; Mouëllic 2013; Lösel 2013; Zanetti 2014; Feige 2014; Sbordoni 2014; Bertinetto, Ivaldo and Sbordoni 2015; Bresnahan 2015; Heble and Caines 2015; Fertel 2015; Pietropaolo 2016; Santi and Zorzi 2016; Bertinetto 2016a; Siddall and Waterman 2016; Born et al. 2017; Peters 2017; Frye 2017; Brown, Goldblatt and Gracyk 2018; Sbordoni and Rostagno 2018; Lewis 2019; Nachmanovitch 2019.
5 Aristotle 1997: 59 (1448b24).
6 To add some titles to those previously given: Caporaletti 2005; Saladin 2014; Schroeder and Ó hAodha 2014; Toop 2016; Figueroa-Dreher 2016; Guido 2017; Borio and Carone 2017; Mariani 2017; Lehner, Meidhof, and Miucci, 2019; Mills 2019.
7 On this topic, see also Hamilton 2020.
8 Cf. Levinson 2015: 149.
9 See Davies 2011 for a discussion in relation to performing arts.
10 The term was famously coined by George Lewis in reference to Afro-American musical improvisatory practices and in contrast to the "Eurological" kind of musical improvisation, rooted in cultured music of European origin. See Lewis 1996.
11 The issue is also being studied in connection with AI research: Saint-Germier 2017; Lösel 2018; Moruzzi (this volume).
12 Pareyson's theory of *formativity* has roots in Johann Wolfgang Goethe's morphology and in Johann Gottlieb Fichte's philosophy of the image (German: *Bild*). Pareyson was Umberto Eco's teacher at the University of Turin and his philosophy influenced Eco's pioneering book *The Open Work* (Eco 1989), in which the fundamental role of improvisational practices in the artistic avant-gardes of the 20th century was discussed.
13 And not only this, improvisation has also recently been considered a central practice for the aesthetics of the body (or somaesthetics). See Marino 2019.
14 We use here the notion of "exemplification" in the Goodmanian sense of possession of and reference to a property. See Goodman 1976: 52 ff.

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PART I

Art and Improvisation

Theoretical Perspectives

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1

IMPROVISATION AS NORMATIVE PRACTICE

Georg W. Bertram

How is an ontology of improvisation possible? After all, it might seem that improvisations contradict the very idea of ontology. They are, one might think, happenings that lack stable being and, thus, exceed the bounds of ontological reflection. What is more, improvisation in the sense of "bricolage" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 24) can be seen as a strategy to overcome metaphysics in general, since it promises an understanding of human practices that does not rely on stable foundations. Therefore, a critic might call even searching for an ontology of improvisation a serious theoretical mistake. But this reasoning would be deeply misleading because it supposes ontology as an enterprise that excludes processes, transformation, and instability. Even though improvisations are not static, they have a specific being that provides the basis for calling something an improvisation. This article investigates the being in question.

Those who are not skeptical about the very idea of an ontology of improvisation tend to construct their ontology of improvisation around the question as to whether improvisations constitute works. They rely on a common distinction within the philosophy of art, which differentiates between works of art and mere performances that do not attain the status of works (cf. Young and Matheson 2000; Davies 2001: 15; Feige 2014: 56–89). According to this perspective, the most important aim of the philosophy of improvisation is to identify why improvisations aren't works and, thus, to define the features of this specific type of artistic value and the ways in which it is fundamentally different from the type realized by works.

The distinction between composition and improvisation within the philosophy of music serves an analogous function. Compositions, one is tempted to think, are works with a stable structure that more or less prescribes how performances should take place, whereas ("total") improvisations involve no such prescription (cf. Wolterstorff 1975: 121). Even thinkers who reject such a sharp distinction between composition and improvisation tend to delineate what an improvisation is by drawing on this distinction. In this sense, the distinction between works (of art) or compositions, on the one hand, and improvisations as performances, on the other, informs different ways of constructing an ontology of improvisation.

Contrasting improvisations with works (of art) or compositions fits with how many improvising artists understand their craft as something fundamentally different from what is realized by works of art. Improvisations aim at creating a type of artistic value that transcends what one might call "aesthetics of works" (cf. Eco 1989: 21 ff.). One might say that this image is an aspect of the artistic marketing structure of improvisations (think, for instance, of the works and theories of John Cage, Eddie Prévost, and Derek Bailey). But it is, in general, problematic to build a conception of something primarily on how its practitioners understand it. To illustrate, if one bases an analysis of

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what family is solely on the basis of how its members interact with one another and the roles they assume, one risks overlooking the essential societal role of family. In short, how those immediately involved understand a certain practice can always be part of a one-sided self-conception – a false consciousness. Thus, rigorous analysis always needs to question the perspective of the engaged.

And indeed, juxtaposing improvisation with composition is highly problematic; as Alessandro Bertinetto has shown, it necessarily yields conclusions that fail to adequately grasp the specificity of improvisation (cf. Bertinetto 2012a). If one claims that there is "no categorical distinction between improvisation and performance," but rather "a continuum of practices" (Cook 2017: 64), one might think that improvisation should not be understood in contrast to musical composition, but that the very idea of composition should be rethought on the basis of the concept of improvisation (cf. Bertinetto 2020). But this move still doesn't help us determine the specificity of improvisation. It is just an expression of the insight that the concept of composition does not help us understand what improvisation is.

Another reason ontological reflection on improvisation needs reorientation is that improvisation cannot be restricted to art. Improvisation is an essential aspect of everyday practice (cf. Ryle 1976; Bertinetto and Bertram 2020). Because of this, it is not possible to ground ontological reflection on improvisation in a distinction that is inseparably attached to art. We have to start with another basic concept. In what follows, I identify practice as the genus to which improvisation belongs. I then argue that improvisation has to be understood as a specific type of normative practice.[1] According to this conception, improvisation's specificity can be defined by the fact that in it, guiding norms are developed on the spot.

My argument is structured in five parts. The first develops a rough conception of what improvisation is. Against this background, the second part articulates the basic structure of improvisation in terms of impulse and response. The third part explains the way in which the impulse-and-response structure has to be understood as the basis of the specific type of normative practice that improvisation is. An important aspect of the normative practice in question, I argue in the fourth part, is improvisational skills. Finally, the fifth part summarizes the specificity of improvisation being a normative practice.

1 Towards a Preliminary Concept of Improvisation

What is an improvisation? An improvisation is a practice that develops something on the spot. Those who improvise do not know what to do in advance. They develop what they do while doing it. But this definition of improvisation necessitates determining what it means to characterize events as practices. A practice is an event where something is done. But what is done can be done within very different frameworks. I'd like to distinguish between three types of practices in order to establish a preliminary conception of improvisation: the first type being rule-governed practices, the second improvisational practices, and the third practices in which something is simply done differently.

Rule-governed practices are practices that are determined by pre-given rules (be they prescriptive or constitutive ones; cf. von Wright 1963: 7 ff.; Searle 1969: 33–42). Within these practices, rules are applied. Improvisations are practices characterized by a lack of pre-given rules (though from this it does not follow that within improvisations there are no norms at play – see Section 3 of this chapter). But practices that are not rule-governed encompass more types of practice than improvisational practices alone. Another type of non-rule-governed practices might be called practices in which something is simply done differently. If I cook a meal and just omit salt for the sake of mere curiosity or fun, I am not improvising. I am just doing something differently. For my cooking to be improvisational, I would need to develop a dish through a series of actions not guided by a fixed recipe or something similar. In this way, improvisational practices are distinct from practices that just differ from how things are done habitually.

But what does it mean to situate improvisation between, on the one hand, practices that are governed by pre-given rules and, on the other, practices in which something is just done differently? We can get a better understanding of how to distinguish between the three types of practices by invoking the concept of the unexpected. While the unexpected is an essential element of improvisation (Bertinetto 2012b), it does not play any role in either rule-governed practices or practices in which something is just done differently. This is especially apparent in practices that are determined by pre-given rules. If practices are guided by rules, only two different end results are possible, namely, cases in which the rules are followed and cases in which they are broken. Neither possibility is unexpected. The same holds for a practice in which something is just done differently. Where randomness reigns, nothing unexpected can happen.

In comparison with the two other types of practice characterized thus far, improvisation can be specified through the concept of the unexpected. The example of cooking is telling in this regard. If I just omit salt, the result cannot be unexpected in a strict sense. This is different in the case of improvising while cooking. Here, it may be the case that the result of the omission of salt is unexpected. Maybe I leave out salt in the hope that this would make the dish taste interesting. But since the taste is not as interesting as I thought, I am forced to react to the unexpected result and modify my approach to the dish. It is typical for improvisation that something unexpected prompts a reaction and changes the way the practice is continued.

Phenomenologically, the unexpected can play two different roles within an improvisation.[2] First, it can be the starting point of improvisational practices. The famous case of Apollo 13 can be explained in this way. The unexpected explosion of one of the spacecraft's oxygen tanks forced the crew to leave the command module and install itself in the lunar module on its way back to Earth. But since the system for removing carbon dioxide from the lunar module was not designed to handle this unanticipated long journey, the crew was forced to improvise a modification to the system. A different form of the unexpected occurs if it is produced within the improvisation itself. Think of the improvisation of a jazz quartet and an unexpected fill-in played by the drummer. An unexpected event like this does not have to mean a great deal. In lots of artistic improvisations, all kinds of unexpected things occur, each providing slight breaks or changes within what is played. In this way, the unexpected is an essential element of improvisational practice.

These preparatory reflections help determine what an ontology of improvisation should consist of. We have to understand improvisation as a practice the specificity of which can be better grasped through the dialectics between the expected and the unexpected (see Peters 2009: 97). Even though one might think that acting on expectations is not a feature of improvisation in the strict sense (cf. Derrida 2004), a closer look reveals it to be an essential dimension of it. Think of the improvisation of a jazz quartet.[3] If, through some action of the drummer, a specific rhythmic structure is established, it is expected for the players to react to the drummer's input in some fashion. What is established during the improvisation evokes expectations. This does not mean that, in continuing, the players are forced to follow the expectations in question. Rather, they themselves are invited to contribute new impulses that realize something unexpected. In this way, the unexpected is developed against the background of a development of expectations. In what follows, I will explain how the dynamics between the expected and the unexpected are essential for improvisation.

2 The Basic Structure of Improvisation: The Single Action Approach vs. the Interaction Approach

Improvisation is a type of practice. Thus, it is tempting to conceive actions as its basic units. One approach to this thesis might be to say that every action determines the course of an improvisation anew by selecting between different options. This idea could be elaborated further by stating that

the spontaneous selection about how to continue is restricted by a complex structure of constraints that shape the action's options.

If you sit by yourself playing the piano, you have to act within the constraints of the instrument, of your playing skills, of your understanding of harmonic structures, etc. Bound by these constraints, you make choices about how to go on while improvising. Or think of another example: While discussing a scientific presentation together with an audience, you select elements of possible answers under the constraints of academic habits, social customs, rules of courtesy, and so on. It might seem that the second case poses a lot more constraints than the first, thus making it more difficult to choose what to do. This could explain why it feels harder to give a scientific presentation than it is to improvise at home on the piano. Some of the actions realize something expected, others bring unexpected things into being.

Let's call the description of improvisation outlined here the "single-action approach" to an ontology of improvisation. The basic idea of the approach states that improvisations are developed through single actions that continuously change the structures of the more overarching improvisational practice in question. Every new action brings the improvisation to a new stage, which itself then becomes the basis of further actions (cf. Brandom 1994: 182–6 for a related explanation of linguistic practices). Even though it might seem promising to conceive of improvisation in terms of single actions, the approach is mistaken. Its main defect lies in the very idea that improvising can be adequately described as a matter of selecting among options. The approach suggests that improvising is a moment-to-moment activity that entails both moments of more expected and moments of less expected choices. The approach provides no account of why we can draw the distinction between what is expected and what is unexpected and why, in improvising, we have to make choices at all. The approach fails to answer the question as to why and how certain choices are meaningful within an improvisation. To answer this question, it is necessary to shed light on the relation between two acts within an improvisation. In what way does one act of selection orient the act that follows it? And why is it possible to conceive of some actions within an improvisation as acts that present something unexpected, whereas other acts are considered to set forth the expected? In order to answer these questions, we have to explain how different actions within an improvisation are bound up with one another.

Another shortcoming of the single action approach is that it does not offer an adequate account of group improvisations (cf. Lewis 2019: 68). Think again of a jazz quartet. It consists of four players improvising. If we take single actions to be constitutive of their improvisation, we cannot really distinguish between what a single saxophone player improvises alone from what she improvises while playing with other players. The single-action approach makes it appear as if, in both cases, she would treat the sounds she produces and those produced by others as external constraints for her actions. Think of when a saxophonist practices by playing along with a recording of three instruments ("playing on an Aebersold"). The recording gives, so it seems, the very same orientation a live improvisation with three other players would give. But this is definitively false. Even though a recording of other instruments may be helpful for training purposes, practicing like this is different from group improvisation. The difference is clear: In the practice situation, whatever the saxophone player improvises does not mean anything to other players. The opposite holds true when she improvises with three other players within a jazz quartet.

Identifying the shortcomings of the single-action approach highlights that an adequate explanation of improvisation should offer an account of interactions within improvisation. I, thus, call the position that I present and defend in what follows an interaction account of improvisation (see Bertram 2010 for an initial outline of the interaction account). The account is meant to explain both how actions within improvisations are bound up with one another and what motivates choices within improvisations. When I play the piano by myself, it may happen that I just play what I have already played several times before. But I can also try something new. When I do that,

I am, in the very next moment, confronted with the problem of how to continue. One option is that I toss out what I just played; maybe I thought it was boring or just didn't lead anywhere. This could result in the absence of any attempt to respond to what is new. But it is equally possible that I try to continue and develop the new idea further. In this case, my ensuing actions provide answers to what could be regarded as an initial impulse. This gives us an idea of how the basic relationships among actions within an improvisation can be interpreted – it is a relation of impulse and response, of call and answer.

The structure of impulse and response is best exemplified by actual interactions within an improvisation. If, in dance improvisation, someone moves her arm with a specific rhythm, the fellow improvisers are confronted with the question of how to react. Their reactions can, in the abstract, take three forms. The first option is that they take up the rhythm of the impulse and move with a similar rhythm. The second option is some kind of counter-action. This can be done in at least two different ways: On the one hand, counter-actions can open a dialogical structure of statements and contradictions that together realize a community of conflict between different perspectives. On the other hand, counter-actions can stage an irresolvable antagonism that ends in a lack of community. The third option is the sheer lack of an answer. This may result out of ignorance or negative assessment. The fellow improvisers may just not have been attentive enough to perceive the affordance that the impulse provided for them. Or they might think that it's not worth it to react to the impulse. In the latter case, they implicitly evaluate the impulse as not providing a launchpad for a plausible further development of the improvisation.

Taking the connection between impulse and response as the germ of improvisation allows us to understand that improvisations are all about how to react to impulses that improvisers are confronted with within the improvisation itself. This becomes clearer if we say that every impulse can itself be understood as a response. The dancer's impulse is motivated by what has been developed within the improvisation beforehand. It is itself a – negative or positive – response to expectations formed in the process of improvising. Strictly understood, no impulse within an improvisation is a beginning (see Derrida 1992). Even the start of an improvisational performance has to be understood as a reaction to previous improvisations and whatever else improvisations react to. Thus, every act in an improvisation is, in principle, both an impulse and a response.

As a response to previous impulses, every action within an improvisation implies an essential dimension of perception. Someone who improvises can only succeed if she not only produces actions but is, at the same time, receptive to the actions she is reacting to (be it her own or those of others). According to the interaction approach, production, and reception coincide within improvisations. In order to explain the relationship between the expected and the unexpected in an improvisation, the coincidence in question is crucial: Expectations are bound up with how improvisers perceive what has been realized in the course of improvising. Only by being perceptively open in this way do improvisers have the ability to react to expectations that have been constructed during the improvisation and, by extension, the ability to create something unexpected sometimes.

The interaction approach of impulse and response enables us to understand why an explanation of improvisation that focuses on single actions is misleading. Such an explanation makes it seem as if the constraints that bind singular actions stem from outside. But improvisations establish structures and constraints within the improvisation itself. The general form of constraints within an improvisation can be captured through the concept of impulse: Actions within improvisations are constrained by the impulses that they respond to. Improvisations consist of chains of actions that construct constraints for themselves. For sure, this does not imply that there are no external constraints relevant for improvisations. Lots of external constraints are relevant. But they are not the basis on which actions within improvisations are connected with one another. Their connectedness has to be explained on the basis of internal constraints.

As discussed above, the single-action approach does not provide an answer to the question of why a choice selected within an improvisation is meaningful for future actions. The foregoing reflections have brought us to a point at which we can explain why this is so. The single-action approach makes it seem as if every action within an improvisation stands on its own. It suggests that improvisers would, in every moment, have to establish something meaningful out of lots of different options they are confronted with as if improvisation were a *creatio ex nihilo*, formed on the basis of external constraints. This gives the impression that every improvisational action produces something meaningful in and through itself. But this contradicts the very idea of producing something meaningful because what is meaningful has to be meaningful for future actions. For the single-action approach, every action determines what is meaningful for itself, and, thus, no past action counts as being meaningful for it. From this follows that no (past) action has the potential to be meaningful for future actions. But, if it is not meaningful for some future action, it isn't meaningful at all. This is to say that the single-action approach's explanation of actions as producing something meaningful is, at the same time, an explanation to the effect that nothing meaningful is realized.

The interaction account helps us overcome this contradiction. If we understand improvisational actions as responses, we understand how they can produce something meaningful. They are meaningful to future responses for which they provide impulses. As realizing something meaningful, improvisational actions are impulses that wait for responses. In the abstract, these responses have the options characterized above: They may take up the impulse, produce some kind of counter-action, or not respond to it at all. At least through the first two types, the impulse is taken as meaningful. As such, it can last for whole improvisational performances and even much longer. Impulses in improvisations can shape the way a performance unfolds. They can even shape many coming performances as well – think of John Coltrane's style of playing the saxophone. This gives us an explanation of how what is expected is established within improvisations. What is expected is established through chains of practices that develop out of impulses. These chains are the background against which something unexpected can be created by new impulses.

To sum up, what has been said thus far, I'd like to emphasize that the ontology of improvisation has to begin with the interaction of impulse and response as the kernel of what improvisation is. Note first that, as the examples suggest, impulse and response do not necessarily have to be produced by different performers. The structure of impulse and response is constitutive of both solo and group improvisations. And note second that the interaction of impulse and response often includes much more than two actions. In most cases, impulses within improvisations are interlinked with lots of responses that unfold over time.

3 Norms in Statu Nascendi

The impulse-and-response structure of improvisation poses the question as to how the connection between the two elements has to be understood. Let's consider again an impulse realized within an improvisation. How does an impulse bind actions that respond to it? As we have already seen, responses that hold the impulse to be meaningful have different options. They can prolong what the impulse provides, or they can set a counter-impulse. When a response prolongs an impulse (through repetition, variation, or some other technique), the response retroactively determines the impulse as a normative authority for itself. The impulse sets a norm to which the responding actions have to adhere if they aim to prolong it.

Two aspects of the normativity in question are decisive here: First, the response is essential for a norm to be established. Impulses, as such, in the sense of single actions, do not constitute norms. They provide affordances for norms that are only ever constituted through reactions. Second, it is decisive for the concept of normativity involved that norms are brought into existence and

developed over time. They are not everlasting stable entities but, rather, change with the development of the practices guided by them. As to the second type of reaction, if impulses are answered with counter-impulses, conflicting norms are brought into play that can be further unfolded during improvisation. Conflicts between norms mutually shape and refine them.

In this way, the interaction approach to improvisation conceives of improvisation as a specific type of normative practice. According to a common understanding that I touched on above, normative practices are practices that apply norms. This is to say that the norms in question precede the practices in the sense that their content is determined independently of the practices in question. One does not necessarily have to understand the norms as being totally independent of practices (as something like Platonic entities) in order to embrace this viewpoint, because it is sufficient to distinguish structurally between the constitution and the application of norms. This could be called a "two-phase" model of normativity. The very idea of applying norms can be grounded on the premise that the constitution of norms precedes practices that are guided by them.

However, improvisations cannot be understood as normative practices in this sense because improvisational practices do not rely on norms that are established in advance. One might object, saying that many improvisations are based on material that precedes them. When some organ player improvises on a hymn or a jazz musician improvises on "My Favourite Things," they are committed to a structure that exerts normative force on them. But commitments like this do not constitute improvisations as normative practices because the repetition of a specific structure as such does not define them as improvisations. Rather, the normativity of improvisations is established through the way in which different elements within them are bound to one another.

Another objection might counter, saying that impulses – which, as I have argued, are essential elements of improvisations – have to be understood as norms that precede responses. But this would be a misunderstanding, for a simple reason. Within improvisations, norms are retroactively established through responses. The most important lesson of the interaction approach is that an impulse within an improvisation does not stand on its own. The impulse only becomes what it is through the responses that follow it. Thus, it has to be regarded as a potential norm. Responses to the impulse "decide" whether a norm comes into being. Within group improvisations, decisions like this connect different individuals with one another in a way that helps form the group. When improvisers play together, they constitute an improvisation through their collaborative effort.

This explanation can draw some support from Jacques Derrida's and Ludwig Wittgenstein's reflections on repetition (cf. Derrida 1982) and rule-following (Wittgenstein 1958: §§198–202). They make clear that norms within improvisations have to be constituted through repetition. Importantly, repetition does not presuppose norms, but has to be understood as their basis. The basic form of repetition is when a second practice picks up what has been established in a first practice. What the first practice "proposes" is established as a norm through the second practice. The connection of first and second practice builds the nucleus of a chain of repetitions that can be continued by a series of other practices. Through chains like this, norms are established and prolonged. Thus, norms are constituted through potentially endless repetitions. Think of jazz standards. The harmonic scheme of a jazz standard (like Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm") can be endlessly reiterated; every new instantiation of it is bound up with changes. Thus, the chain of practices through which a norm is established within improvisations has to be understood as a chain of constant variation and change.

In this way, Derrida's and Wittgenstein's conceptions of normative practices allow us to understand how these practices can be bound up with constant change. Their philosophies enable us to appreciate the thought that norms do not necessarily have a pre-given identity. Rather, their identity can always develop and, thus, entails change. This opens up space for a different conception of what the application of a norm looks like. Here, application is not the reiteration of a norm that is already established. Rather, application is a practice that re-establishes the norm

(cf. Gadamer 1960: 306–10 for a related explanation). In other words, within improvisation, the constitution of norms and their application cannot be distinguished. In contradistinction to the two-phase model, the interaction approach reveals that the normative structure only evidences one phase – a phase in which constitution and application are inextricably connected with one another. This is the first fundamental feature of improvisation as a normative practice.

A second characteristic consists of the constant renewal of norms. In every moment of an improvisation, new impulses can call for the constitution of new norms. Every impulse within an improvisation can be understood as questioning the norms that governed the improvisation up until the moment it chimed in. Impulses question norms in an ambiguous sense, though. On the one hand, the questioning can be an aspect of what it means to apply norms that have already been guiding the improvisation. On the other hand, the questioning can be an attempt to establish new norms and, thus, instigate a break. The fundamental ambiguity results from the double potential inherent in impulses, as there is no clear-cut distinction between continuity and discontinuity, between constant change and complete renewal.

Note that this is a conceptual claim. We can doubtlessly think of experiences of clear continuity and clear discontinuity in improvisations, such as when the character of an improvisation changes completely from one moment to the other. Still, this kind of experienced discontinuity could perhaps be understood as a form of continuity in the sense that what preceded it gave an affordance to instigate the radical shift. Such continuity within discontinuity exemplifies the meaning of the notion that improvisations contain no clear-cut distinction between continuity and discontinuity. Every impulse can prompt a development in either direction. It can effect a new application of already established norms, and at the same time, it can attempt to kick off something new. Improvisation as a normative practice is a constant struggle between continuation and starting something new. Wittgenstein coined a pithy phrase to grasp this sort of structure: "We make up the rules as we go along" (Wittgenstein 1958: § 83). Improvisations engage in a constant making up of norms.

A third characteristic of improvisation as a normative practice has been implied in the foregoing reflections: its temporal structure. According to a common misunderstanding, improvisation happens in the here and now. But, as the elucidation of the connection between impulse and response demonstrates, the basic temporal structure of an impulse is not the present. Rather, it is oriented towards the future because an impulse always requires an answer to realize itself. As explained, only through responses to impulses are norms established within an improvisation. In addition, every impulse is itself a response to past impulses, and it might itself contribute to the constitution of norms by taking past impulses as being authoritative for itself. Thus, the temporal structure of improvisational normative practices can be captured in the formula: "opening up the future by responding to the past."

In this way, the impulse-and-response structure of improvisation is bound up with a specific temporal structure of normativity. This temporality can be illustrated with a concept from chemistry – norms within improvisations are always *in statu nascendi*. The instability of guiding norms is a defining feature of improvisations as normative practices. They wait to be developed further through future responses, which, in turn, constantly question the norms that impulses establish. The norms established within improvisational practices are renewed again and again. In this sense, improvisations are bound by norms that are always in the making.[4]

Defining improvisation in this way helps us understand how its creative aspect is based on normative structures. As I have argued, improvisations are not composed of single actions. Rather, they are structured by interactions that adhere to an impulse-and-response structure. Thus, it is not possible to grasp the creative aspect of improvisation by referring to single actions. The creative dimension has to be explained with reference to interactions as the structuring elements of improvisation. On these grounds, the creative dimension of improvisation has to be conceived

of as being bound up with its normativity. Improvisation is a form of creativity realized through normative practice. The constant making of norms (norms *in statu nascendi*) is what explains improvisation's creativity.

4 Improvisational Skills and the Evaluative Dimension of Improvisational Practices

Defining improvisation being a specific normative practice necessitates including another element into the ontological equation – namely, the skills of those who improvise. If the constant questioning of guiding norms through impulses is at the core of improvising, then the skills necessary to develop impulses are a key element. In short, improvisation has to be conceived of as a skilled practice. The skills of improvisers are an essential part of improvisation as a normative practice. They are bound up with the specific kind of normativity realized in improvisation.

To illustrate, compare the normative practice of improvisation with a simple routine. The skills involved in simple routines run on stereotypes (think of the way factory work is represented in Chaplin's *Modern Times*), and the skills do not change in any way. They are a prerequisite for engaging in the routine practice. As such, they exist independently of the specific continuation of the practice. During the practice, the skills continue to exist as they have before it. Things are completely different in improvisation. Thinking about how people criticize failures in improvisations might help us appreciate this point. Improvisations are considered failures if improvisers simply repeat what they have been trained to play. The success of improvisations is measured with reference to the realization of novel, unexpected impulses. However, the success of improvisations also relies on adequate responses to unexpected impulses. These two points, anchored in the structure of impulse and response, give us abstract criteria for judging improvisation's success.

Thus, the skills for improvising have to be conceived of as skills for producing and reacting to the unexpected (cf. Peters 2017: 165). Improvisers have to learn not to stick to trained patterns and established schemes, but to produce elements that *question and break* trained patterns and established schemes. The skills required for improvisation are the ability to question and, thus, unlearn and revise routines (see Bertinetto and Bertram 2020: 204–8). This holds for the production of adequate reactions as well. If an improviser is confronted with an impulse by a fellow player, she does, in principle, not know how to react to it. No pattern or scheme will help her arrive at an adequate answer. She has to deviate from what she has learned and played thus far in order to react successfully. The skills needed for the development of a deviation like this are skills of questioning and un- or re-learning routines.

These skills are exercised and altered in the act of improvising. Again and again, the improviser's skills are challenged by impulses and responses; her interactions with them alter her skills. In this way, improvisations affect the skills brought to the session by improvisers. One might say that the skills for improvising imply what Catherine Malabou calls "plasticity" (Malabou 1996): Improvisers' skills entail the ability to develop those very skills constantly. In effect, the constant development of norms within improvisation correlates with a constant development of skills; both are constitutively bound up with one another.

But the skills analyzed thus far involve more than the production of impulses and reactions. They also encompass perception. An improviser who wants to respond to an impulse, like a new rhythmic structure, has to perceive it as something unexpected, which she recognizes in its specificity despite not being able to anticipate it. If we think of skills as consisting of trained patterns, we cannot explain how someone is able to perceive something unexpected in its specificity. Thus, the plasticity of perception should be regarded as a pertinent skill for successful improvisation.

A common assumption of what one might call a post-Foucauldian understanding of human practice holds that normative structures condition what is perceivable (cf. Foucault 1979). This

assumption plays a decisive role in theories like those of Pierre Bourdieu (1977), Jacques Rancière (2004), and Judith Butler (2005). The basic reasoning behind these positions is that normative structures established within a cultural context inform the way in which those who live in that context think and act. Thinking and acting are intrinsically connected with perceptive skills; therefore, normative structures inform perceptive skills. It follows that those who live in a specific cultural context are not able to perceive things, properties, and events that do not fit in any way within their cultural context's normative structures.

This line of reasoning can help articulate the kind of perceptual skills involved in improvisation. If the skills were restricted in line with the post-Foucauldian model, those who improvise would not be able to perceive what impulses confront them with. They would only perceive what conforms with already established normative structures. But impulses in improvisations do not conform to pre-existing normative and perceptual structures. It follows that the perceptual skills of improvisers must enable them to perceive something that is unexpected in its specificity. In this way, the perceptive skills that ground improvisation must be open towards non-normalized impulses, which makes it possible for improvisers to overcome given patterns and established schemes. Only through such openness can improvisers assess the unexpected affordances of impulses. In this sense, the process of unlearning and relearning in improvisation applies not only to playing and acting but also to perception.

Connecting the perceptual dimension of improvisational skills with their normative dimension leads to the conclusion that another essential aspect of responses in improvisation is evaluation. By responding, improvisers evaluate impulses (of their fellow players). Evaluation is a key component of improvisational responses. An improviser's responses can value impulses as providing a good idea, making real an interesting exception, or provoking a break with the norms that had thus far guided the improvisation. Improvisational responses implicitly entail statements like this. The evaluative dimension of responses might be described as reflection embedded in practices because practices of responding implicitly reflect on impulses' potential to inspire the improvisation. The evaluations can manifest themselves in the three different types of responses outlined above: prolonging, countering, or ignoring the impulse.

An objection might be that evaluation presupposes norms and is, thus, not intelligible if no pre-given norms are in play. But the assumption on which the objection rests is not tenable. Even though some evaluative practices presuppose the norms to which they refer, not all such practices do.[5] Think of jurisdictional practices within case law systems in which judges do not rely on fixed laws (cf. Derrida 1992; Brandom 1999; Ramshaw 2013). The judges' actions involve evaluating past cases in order to decide whether they provide exemplary rulings. Their evaluations are implicit in the judgments they make. But this does not mean that the judges evaluate in the absence of real normative orientation. Their normative orientation lies in the future. How they evaluate is the object of future evaluations of judges to come (and how these judges evaluate is itself again the object of future evaluations of other judges). The case law model helps us understand how evaluation works when it is not grounded in pre-given norms. Here, evaluations are normatively bound by future evaluations. This is how we have to conceive the normative grounding of evaluations in improvisation. The evaluations implicit in responses are normatively bound by how future responses will evaluate these responses. In this way, we have to explain what it means that the constitution of norms is dependent on evaluations that themselves are not grounded in pre-given norms.

Norms *in statu nascendi* depend on the performative, perceptual, and evaluative dimensions of improvisers' skills. The normativity specific to improvisation is dependent on skills developed in such a way that they can be productively transformed within improvisational practices. But transformation, as such, does not suffice. Only in connection with evaluation can normative structures be established within practice. Improvisation as a normative practice is grounded in performative, perceptual, and evaluative skills.

5 Summary: Improvisation as a Normative Practice

What is improvisation? I started my reflections with the claim that improvisation as a practice has to be distinguished both from practices governed by pre-given rules and practices in which something is simply done differently. We have seen that it is possible to account for this distinction by conceiving of improvisation as a specific type of normative practice. Improvisation is characterized by the fact that, within it, norms are constantly in the making. They are established and renewed by webs of impulses and responses, which have the double potential of, on the one hand, reproducing and, on the other hand, breaking norms. Bringing forth impulses and responses presupposes performative, perceptual, and evaluative skills that are transformed within the practice of impulse and response itself. Improvisation presupposes an openness towards skills being questioned and transformed. Improvisation is a practice in which norms and skills are developed in strong correlation to one another. In turn, their intertwined development is bound up with a temporal structure that exceeds the present. On the basis of past developments, improvisational practices open up the future, in the sense that they wait for future practices to determine their normative impact. The ontology of improvisation can be summarized as such: Improvisations are normative practices in which (a) norms are established *in statu nascendi* through (b) the constant and future-oriented production of impulses and responses that (c) transform the norms and skills of improvisation itself.[6]

Notes

1 The account offered in this paper has been developed and sharpened over the course of many discussions with Alessandro Bertinetto. Among others, Bertinetto and Bertram 2020 provides an indispensable background for everything presented here.

2 The two different roles of the unexpected can be understood as motivating a distinction between two types of improvisation; see Goehr 2016.

3 Other examples can be found in classical music. Think of someone who improvises in a specific style (e.g., Palestrina or Bach) or of someone who improvises a fugue. In these cases, one acts according to expectations built on structures that precede the improvised performance.

4 Bertinetto has highlighted an important consequence of improvisation's normative nature by arguing that mistakes are always possible within improvisations; cf. Bertinetto 2016.

5 Without any doubt, evaluations within improvisations often rely on cultural and social norms. But if these norms become important for the improvisation's internal development, they are transformed through the improvisation itself and, thus, no longer function as external presuppositions.

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2
IMPROVISATION AS RESONANCE

Giovanni Matteucci

1 Introduction

This chapter aims to bring to the fore what it means to consider the phenomenon of improvisation as both meaningful and not governed by any external criteria. Namely, I will assume that improvisation takes on a peculiar, or even "radical," sense insofar as it is something strictly contingent but not merely accidental. Whether such a conception is possible, under what theoretical conditions, and with what (if any) profitable implications are the issues that will be addressed here. Needless to say, I believe this conception is possible and fruitful. In my opinion, it allows us to grasp the aesthetic root of the meaningful interaction with the environment that characterizes human beings, according to an interpretation also recently supported by Johnson (2018).

The following text is divided into three parts. The first (§§ 2–4) revolves around cardinal features of radical improvisation, such as the intertwining of "form" and "content," the interactional field structure that is proper to experience, and the "primality" of this kind of creativity. The second part (§ 5) deals with some reflections provided by Merleau-Ponty on the expressive language, serving to introduce the key concept of resonance. Finally, the last part (§§ 6–8) follows the red thread of the resonance phenomenon in order to show the main theoretical implications that can be drawn from the approach adopted here.

In the following analysis, improvisation is not meant only as a musical praxis. If my examples privilege the dimension of music, it is primarily due to the limits of my own competences. But it's not just about that. One of the central theses I advocate is that improvisation is radical to the extent that it concerns non-propositional and non-representational contents of experience, without, on the other hand, being meaningless or merely subjective. Therefore, it expresses an intrinsically musical core that connotes human interaction with the world as an aesthetic manifestation, in the form of resonance, of a mind that is "extended" according to an enactivist and non-functionalist conception (Matteucci 2019a; but see also Gallagher 2017). In this specific musical sense, I would conceive of improvisation as a primitive form of human creativity, whatever the context in which it takes place. All in all, then, even if I had other competences, the effort to imagine fitting examples supporting my claims would still have brought me into the musical sphere.

2 From the Pair Form-Content to the Twine Configuration-Material

We could say that improvisation is generally characterized, among other things, by a full coincidence of "form" and "content" in a contingent experience. The sequence of elements or events

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we admire as improvisation fascinates us because of the way in which the simple manifestation of gestures, sounds, words, lines, etc. embody a shape that, by definition, we do not consider pre-existing. In other words, this shape is not an ideal structure that the performer would make perceptible; it is immanent in a concrete and flowing performance.

I would be reluctant to speak of improvisation, at least in its radical sense, if it were proved, on the contrary, that what is taking place is only the actualization of a previous structure. We become disappointed even when it is apparent that a performer is passing off as improvised something that is actually a prepackaged technical construction. Improvisation seems to be under the motto *Ars est celare Artem* (art is to conceal art): the "coolness" surrounding the performance largely fades away when we perceive how much study it took for the performer to juggle the improvisation. It would be better, then, to speak simply of interpretation, execution, rendering, and so on. More generally, when evidence was found that each praxis couldn't help but translate into reality a prior pattern, improvisation appeared to be a myth or a turn of phrase. The sworn enemies of its concept are both every form of genuine Platonism and the determinism thriving in reductionism. If any act we perform actually resulted from a neural-cognitive process that governs it "from the outside" because it is hard-wired in our neural system, there would be no room for a radical conception of improvisation (which I will refer to henceforth as "radical improvisation"). The latter would also amount to a practice of modules or models, albeit with all the sweetening "non-determination" clauses that should pacify our pride in wanting to be recognized as creative animals.

This does not mean that we need to consider improvisation unconstrained – quite the contrary. The clause of radical improvisation is the perceptual presence of "content" that does not have a logically or temporally extrinsic relationship with their own "form." Both the internal/external distinction and the before/after succession are no longer relevant. Indeed, it would likely be misleading even to resort to the couple form and content, two categories that are traditionally compromised by a dichotomous relationship. Any oppositional scheme seems inappropriate for a phenomenon that always appears to be intrinsically unitary. Instead of two conflicting principles, what's at stake here are two aspects of an overall texture. In the course of perception, they work as the different faces of a solid, each of which has the reason for its own development in each other's compossibility, which is dictated by the state of affairs. There is a reciprocal and fruitful indeterminableness between them: the more a perspective is adopted that focuses unilaterally on one aspect, the more the other aspect acts as a reason for the development of the perceptual scene, not despite but precisely because the second aspect escapes the determination that conforms the adopted perspective. This gives the phenomenon as a whole an immanent bistability, which forces us always to switch from one aspect to another.

To describe radical improvisation, I therefore propose following a different terminology. On the one hand, *the texture as a whole shows itself in the aspect of a configuration*; it exists only in the way in which it is sedimented in a percept that, due to tendencies that appear inherent in it (i.e., vectorially), exceeds the simple collection of (scalar) data, of single elements; therefore, configuration means a *Gestaltung* that is working in each of the segments in which the analysis could fragment the whole. On the other hand, *the texture as a whole shows itself in the aspect of a material*; the percept here acts not as an inert, static matter, devoid in itself of any meaning, but rather as something endowed with a certain constructive affordance (i.e., a material) that is loaded with potentialities of sense as soon as it shows up. And precisely because it carries development trends in itself, it always appears like it is about to shatter the simple formal structure that would seem to enclose it once the process has apparently ended, for the perceptual experience has ceased, e.g., for the musician stopped playing or the listener stopped paying attention. Just as it brings the "formal" aspect back to a configurative process, radical improvisation frees the "content" from a static conception. In this way, it embodies a cardinal principle of aesthetic experience. "Form" and "matter" are not simply situated side by side within a discrete whole, but one flows continuously into the other. As

noted by Dewey, in aesthetic experience, "what is form in one connection is matter in another and vice-versa. Color that is matter with respect to expressiveness of some qualities and values is form when it is used to convey delicacy, brilliance, gayety" (Dewey 1987: 133).

In this regard, it is worth mentioning what happened to the musical genre of *impromptu* specifically in the 19th century. The persistence of the label attests an increasingly formalized conception that yet, in the hands of composers like Chopin, Liszt, and Brahms, actually became a disguise practice of this bistable twines. It was perhaps seen as a residual instance of freedom in a musical world about to be dominated by hypercoding. However, it proved to be a case of mere bad conscience, so to speak, since it favored the regimentation of this bistability within that same world, with the progressive imposition of increasingly stable forms on increasingly determined contents.

3 The Dynamic Field of Improvisation

Although in improvisation the bistable twine configuration-material does not conform to the sequence of an antecedent and a consequent, it being a process is undeniable. The problem is that in order to describe its development, we cannot refer to levels or patterns that respond to merely oppositional logics, such as permanence of form vs flow of content. To this end, the notion of "field" is helpful.[1]

In an electromagnetic field, the amount of energy is inseparable from the arrangement of the whole: material and configuration are aspects of a single unitary phenomenon that physics captures in its bistability. Saying that each component of a field counts as a vector means that it is a configured material (an element with a tendency) and, at the same time, that it contributes to the material configuration (a force linked to a specific position). According to Heisenberg's famous uncertainty principle, it is not possible to simultaneously determine the two physical quantities of "momentum" and "position," although they presuppose each other as complementary variables of an overall phenomenon. The simple act of measuring is an interaction that alters the field as much as it gives rise to its manifestation according to determined aspects or qualities (see Heisenberg 1952: 77 ff.). The material aspects and the configurative aspects blend together in the efficient action of the energy that runs throughout the field, which consequently is intrinsically procedural insofar as it is interactional. Therefore, the problem can no longer be defining the reality of isolated contents as if they were elementary particles. The problem is expressing the interaction that is carried out as a behavior taken on by those "contents" while configuring an overall field, even in terms of a knowledge (see Heisenberg 1955: 12).

Projecting this matrix onto phenomena such as radical improvisation means describing experience by avoiding starting from entities that interact only downstream, by virtue of their allegedly autonomous constitution. Not only every vector, but every pole of a field also qualifies itself for how it behaves within a complex framework of interactions with all the vectors. In their concreteness, after all, even the poles can then be assimilated with vectors. And if the mind consists in operating a field like this, the mind implied here is, at the same time, extended (like a field) and embodied (like a material configuration). Every pole that stands out emerges from large areas of passive and anonymous constitution, resulting in, therefore, like any other vector, a material rather than a matter in the sense mentioned above.

Thus, in musical improvisation the actors involved (the musician-instrument system, the piece that "takes voice," and – as we will see at the end – its aesthetic effect) stand out only as outcomes of composite dynamics pervading the texture. From a phenomenological point of view, the pre-eminent co-belonging of these vectors prevents us from initially conceiving of a so-called subject as an entity that is abstractly separated from a so-called object. Both, like poles, act in the configurative continuity of their materiality, in which the organism of the musician linked to the body of the instrument, the voice of the piece, the aesthetic effect, which are all equally involved as aspects of a perceptual scene.

This is confirmed by the fact that any actual improvisation can integrate, as it almost fatally happens, its own bistable core with much more. The concrete improvised solo of a jazz musician is full of shreds of previous standards, harmonic evolutions foreseen by the musical system of reference, reflexes of rhythms and melodies acquired with exercise, virtuosity dictated by a specific musical instrument, familiarity with certain timbres to which it wants to get closer, idealized aesthetic effects, etc. And yet improvisation becomes captivating because all this, as material, is contingently sedimented in a configuration that is not, either before or after or now, something fixed. Even when an improvised solo is "repeated" twice, its first occurrence becomes material for the new performance; and in none of its occurrences it has an ideal value.

When we are listening to an improvisation and recognize a pre-existing thematic cell, what's appreciated is how it lives in the unprecedented improvised ecosystem. It changes materially in order to configure itself so that it is vectorially integrated with the field that is being carried out, i.e., with our aesthetic experience. In jazz practice, this often takes on the features of an, "And yet!" experience. In the course of some improvisations a standard's pattern can emerge, which does not take over, but, rather, disguises itself and plays hide and seek among the textures of the developing material. There are moments in which it looms markedly, alternating with other moments in which it flows back into the configuration. Then we experience *and yet* we do not experience the standard, which fascinates us precisely because it surfaces from *and yet* sinks into the overlying waves of the field. The standard does not count in itself either as a form that is imposed or as a content that is given. It counts insofar as it becomes a material that feeds the configuration of that field. It is like when an oasis of harmonic repleteness sticks out against the horizon of a disharmonious desert without sublimating the latter in a cloying roundness. That is why sometimes we are pleased to recognize the most banal tune at the heart of a jazz performance addressed to fine connoisseurs. It is not simply quotation or appropriation, but reactivation of configurable materials for the benefit of improvisation as such. One famous case is the long minutes of Di Meola's and McLaughlin's pure improvisation, where their call into play of every material, noises included, flows into the cursory reprise of *The Pink Panther* theme.[2]

4 Improvisation as a Primitive Experiential Core

By definition, improvisation must be experienced "all at once" and "unexpectedly." It appears immediate in a twofold sense: it shows up abruptly and hides the traces of every mediation, namely, it takes on the guise of a gratuitous *apparition* oscillating between material and configurative aspects. But then an improvisation is neither subsumable to any concept nor does it subsume any individual under itself. As for its way of appearing, it is a "particular-universal."

Improvisation makes a specific arc of experience unique, as if a singular performance has the illocutionary force of a baptism. It is however its own proper name that the performance reveals – embodying, at the same time, officiant and subject of one of those rites of passage in which someone takes on a new name according to the character he/she expresses for the community. Perhaps it could be said that improvisation combines in itself the apodictic power of the type and the assertive force of the token.[3] The other side of this coin is its extreme fragility, or even evanescence, in contingent moments of maximum density. Everything that can fall within it, even the whole technical-cognitive contribution provided by the performer, must be exhausted as a vector that contributes to feeding a core where configuration and material do not refer to anything substantial beyond their own manifestation.

This core is the limit of an infinitely small neighborhood if it is obtained by subtraction from both technical-cognitive contributions and what is mediated by conventions. As small as it can be, it orients every vector and, therefore, makes "improvisational" the sense of a whole arc that can

reach enormous dimensions. When it comes to the virtuosos of improvisation, we admire their ability to temporally and spatially extend this core.

Improvisation understood in this way may appear to be an ideal case, never properly achievable as such (see Bertinetto 2011: 92). However, it delineates a crucial phenomenon. If we adopt a perspective that avoids mythologizing not only spirit and nature but also human reason, we will have to recognize that there is no norm, rule, or model for a field of interaction before its immanent articulation in its crucial moments. It is for the way the field manifests itself as something that is constitutively *in-provisus* (unexpected because unforeseen) that dense neighborhoods become salient foci. Norms, rules, or models arise as formal projections of this primitive material *a priori*. Therefore, what is embodied in radical improvisation seems to be a decisive component of human experience. Indeed, our experience still retains an echo of a primitive interaction in the measure, degrees, and moments it preserves the crosswise and tacitly operative connection between organism and environment. Only against this background can a meaningful cognitive thematization of something like an object for a subject arise. It is by improvising that the human interaction between organism and environment becomes a context and a theater also for distinctions and hiatuses where that juxtaposition between subject and object dominates, which is hypostatized through *hysteron proteron* by the typically modern theory of knowledge. As a consequence, in relation to radical improvisation, we should go deeper into the expressive force of material-configurative constrains. Pace Kantianism of all sorts, it's not in terms of either "determinant" or "reflective" rules that we can do justice to (this form of) creativity.[4]

5 Expressive Language as Improvisation

Elements to describe the phenomenon at hand can be drawn from Merleau-Ponty. To unravel our tangle, we can use his analysis of language as "expressive," namely, not understood as a vehicle for already established information packets. On this, in *The Prose of the World*, Merleau-Ponty says:

> Speaking and listening, action and perception, are quite distinct operations for me only when I reflect upon them. Then I analyze the spoken words into "motor impulses" or "articulated elements," understanding them as auditory "sensations and perceptions." When I am actually speaking I do not first *figure* the *movements* involved [*à faire*]. My whole bodily system concentrates on finding and saying the word, in the same way that my hand moves toward what is offered to me. Furthermore, it is not even the word or phrase that I have in mind but the person. I speak to him as I find him, with a certainty that at times is prodigious. I use words and phrases he can understand or to which he can react [*être sensible*]. If I have any tact, my words [*ma parole*] are both a means of action and feeling; there are eyes at the tips of my fingers [*cette main porte des yeux à son extremité* = this hand bears eyes at its extremity]. When I am listening, it is not necessary that I have an *auditory perception* of the articulated sounds but […] the conversation pronounces itself [*se parle*] within me. It summons me and grips me [*il m'interpelle et je retentis* = it summons me and I resound]; it envelops and inhabits me to the point that I cannot tell what comes from me and what from it.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 1973: 18 f.)*[5]

The full coincidence between speaking and listening in expressive language is comparable to what has been introduced above in terms of radical improvisation, although what's at stake in the latter is not the interpersonal communication of linguistic meanings. Here, the specific reference to the musical sphere becomes very instructive.

The equivalent of the interlocutor for the musician at work is in the first place the piece itself that is being carried out. It, too, appears as an integrated vector of that overall body that "envelops

and inhabits" also the alleged subject of the performance, namely the musician-instrument system. Since the improvisation is by definition unforeseen, it proceeds without anyone being able to "see" the piece in the sense of a Cartesian vision. By succeeding in carrying on the performance, the performing system can rely only on its sense of touch or tact, on "hands with eyes at their extremities," sensitive receptors able to see through contact. The musician-instrument system sees the piece on its fingertips, like the blind sees with his/her stick, according to Bateson's example (1972: 231 ff.), or like the miner sees by groping in the dark of the gallery, according to Adorno's example (1977: 298). This *aisthesis* is not transparent, nor ideal or idealizable in the proper sense of the *idea*. If anything, it is a concrete and opaque praxis, embedded in an extended materiality (evident already in the musician-instrument vector system), which is based on qualitative and immersive correspondences, according to a matrix of the *corréspondances* that can be traced back to Baudelaire. The frontal position of a subject who faces a target or object is excluded. It is the whole field that proceeds blindly with respect to presumed defined outcomes. To this end, each material is exploited to the full. It counts not for what can be said or known about it, but for the experience that the all-at-once interaction with it can generate.

A peculiar aesthetic ability is so accomplished. The key word to describe it is "resonance." As Merleau-Ponty writes, the contingent overall texture, the ongoing interaction, "summons me and I resound." Speaking or, musically, producing sounds is already listening, in the sense of knowing how to obey not some rule but what is constraining in this material configuration, of knowing how to follow not a rule but the energy curves that are manifesting themselves. The roles of subject and object that the musician-instrument and the piece take on appear always to be on the verge of being reversed. In this sense, improvising, as – for Merleau-Ponty – uttering a "speaking" word rather than a "spoken" one, is knowing how to give the ongoing field further resonance that vibrates in every vector. That is, improvisation, in its being bodily and extra-cranial, is resonance. It comes to the fore as a dense texture in which the vectors mutually respond to each other; its nature is that "of the echo" or, "in other words, of a carnal generality: what warms me, warms him [*scil.:* my interlocutor]; it is founded on the magical action of like upon like (the *warm* sun makes me *warm*), on the fusion of me embodied and the world [*fusion moi incarné – monde*]" (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 20 n.).

Elsewhere, Merleau-Ponty provides another indication for understanding the twine configuration-material as it is extraneous to any mind-world, or subject-object, dualism and is, therefore, irreducible to any abstraction from the analytic materiality of the interaction. This can be found when he speaks directly of improvisation in a pictorial and literary sense. He notes that one thing is the mere extemporaneity of the use of words and colors, while another is the practice in which already acquired contents enter as a material to give voice to a primitive field as a complex of aspects and therefore as a resonant body coinciding with an extended mind – namely, "the improvisation of the artist who […], turned toward the world, […] has finally composed for himself an expressive organ, like an acquired voice which is more his own than his primordial cry [*que son cri des origines*]" (Merleau-Ponty 1973: 56).

All this confirms the possibility of extending Merleau-Ponty's paradigm concerning expressive language to radical improvisation. Their common denominator is an experience that proceeds through overall resonance. As Merleau-Ponty notes, what happens in these cases occurs in the very perception as a primitive interaction between organism and environment. Here the qualities are correspondences according to which the field takes on a particular expressive connotation. Everything seems to speak the language of those characters, albeit in the medium that is chosen as the matrix of the configuration that is getting articulated. The contrast with Descartes and his model of disembodied, intra-cranial, and a-medial mind becomes evident when Merleau-Ponty considers the perception of a woman we suddenly meet. Our perception here is far from similar to the detached contemplation of a mere mannequin; it is materially accomplished as a resonance

thanks to those sensitive receptors that act and let us see by contact. It is difficult not to think of Baudelaire's *À une passante*, that sketches and puts to music an encounter of this kind and its resonance as a constitutive natural echo:

> A woman passing by is not first and foremost a corporeal contour for me, a colored mannequin, a spectacle in a given spot. She is "an individual, sentimental, sexual expression." She is a flesh in its full presence, with its vigor and weakness there in her walk or the click of her heel on the ground. She is a unique way of varying the accent of feminine being and thus of human being, which I understand the way I understand a sentence, namely, because it finds in me the system of resonators that it needs.
>
> *(Merleau-Ponty 1973: 59 f.)*

Thus, for the performer who's improvising, any accident mediated by any sensory but also generally cognitive channel can become his/her interaction partner. It contributes to the overall resonance, inhabiting the threshold where the complex of perception is about to become a well-formed expression. If the audience applauds, the musician replies by "applauding with his/her own instrument," whatever this may concretely mean; maybe just by adding an expressive accent to the piece. Even what could appear to be a mistake if measured against the yardstick of a predefined reference system, in improvisation becomes configuration-material twine. As Hancock says in an anecdote about an interaction between him and Miles Davis, it is "something that happened," "without any *a priori* positive or negative connotations" (Bertinetto 2016b: 92).

Perhaps this is why indeed every sequence of notes can become improvisation in that musical practice, which, at least by convention, places improvisation at the center of its status. Perhaps, however, this is also why jazz always risks falling into something cloying when, through these reprises, it lets itself be dominated not by configuration and material, but by form and content, by fixed compositional principles, and by mythically natural sound matters, that is, when it turns the peculiar field dynamism of improvisation into static structures.

To test the consistency of the strategy adopted here it is necessary to go deeper into the concept of resonance. To this end, we will consider different analysis plans that, although descriptively distinguishable, are not mutually separated.

6 Resonance Phenomena: Sound Box and Sounding Board

A first plan of analysis concerns not only the fact that, but also the way in which, the notion of resonance implies the violation of the classical dual scheme that considers activity and passivity as irreconcilably opposed. Resonance displays a relational pattern in which it is impossible to ascribe activity and passivity in a linear and univocal manner to vectors that are distinct *per se*, as an (active) subject and a (passive) object should be. It is precisely this basic structure that guarantees its congruence with radical improvisation.

One may have the impression that speaking of resonance this way could lead to a sort of regression to a magical-mythical conception of the world, in which what populates the environmental scenario seems to directly address those who experience it. But by doing so, we would assimilate resonance with the resounding of a sound in an empty cavity that amplifies it, as would be the sound box of a string instrument. The subject would act as a merely formal, hollow space that hosts content coming from the outside and being amplified, i.e., as a discontinuous portion of reality that is folded back into its interiority. This would be completely consistent with the Cartesian image of the intracranial mind, which is distinct in principle from that which surrounds it.

On the contrary, the specific element of resonance is, to still follow the example of the string instrument, not the amplification that happens in a hollow sound box, but the transmission of the

sound throughout the solid body of a vibrating sounding board. Here a sound manifests itself with a peculiar timbre because, thanks to resonance, it is less and less mere acoustic height, and finds a real enactment, becoming fully acoustic body. Then, even before assuming an optional attitude, the so-called subject is nothing but a sounding board of material voices that populate the environment in which the same subject spreads out as embodied and embedded mind (namely, he/she is resonance of an extended mind according to a dynamic and energetic sense).

Cooren's metaphor of ventriloquism seems to fit quite well all this, since it expresses "the phenomenon by which an actor makes another actor speak through the production of a given utterance" (Cooren 2010: 1). It is not a matter of amplifying an extraneous voice acting as a sound box, but of giving voice, as a sounding board, to the weaving of the energy field in which one is embedded and of which one is at the same time constituted. This is well explained by Bruno Latour in his preface to Cooren's book: "we are being acted upon by those invisible entities that 'haunt' us and populate (or even crowd) the interactions" (Latour 2010: XV).

Such a claim involves the effective overcoming of the dichotomous distribution of activity and passivity in the experiential interaction, since according to this way of conceiving of interaction, the interactants are not only considered "as ventriloquists who make dummies say or do things," but they "can *also* be seen as animated or moved by specific agencies (principles, values, norms, etc.) that ventriloquize them." As a consequence, Cooren's idea "is not to *reduce* interactants to puppets or dummies but to show that any action implies a form of passion, of passivity" (Cooren 2010: 9). The spoken, explicit voice of those who take part in an interaction allows the implicit voices of what through this interaction comes to expression to resonate while being almost tacit and, therefore, even more materially. We don't distinguish between them except for the grain that they give to the sound timbre. Resonance is material, while amplification *per se* is only a further development of resonance in the strict sense. The materiality of the resonance provides, then, a good image of the complexity of an interactional context beyond the usual image of dialogic conversation, since it highlights the potential and impersonal energies that act from within this context (see Cooren 2010: 136).

The implications appear to be of great importance if connected with the so-called material engagement theory, which sheds particular light on the theory of evolution itself and, therefore, in general, on the interaction between organism and environment for *Homo sapiens*, a being who is in constant cultural improvement of its own biology (see Malafouris 2012: 245 f.). Aesthetic resonance is a primitive manifestation of the experience with the surrounding environment that is also expressed in the gestures (bodily, verbal, iconic, musical, etc.) of a vector that is materially involved in it.

Thus, a decisive characteristic also for radical improvisation emerges. With the sound it "produces," the musician-instrument system becomes the material medium of vibrations of the overall field that is taking shape. In improvisation, one is implicated as a body (with *its* multiple intelligences), not as an abstract mind. Therefore, a merely cognitive analysis of improvisation is unsatisfactory, even though it is based on the model of the extended mind (see Cochrane 2008: 333 f.). This is shown whenever the musician grimaces and assumes postures in an attempt to get in tune with the experiential field that is taking voice. Here the bodily musician-instrument system acquires, in its own terms, the configuration of the piece, of which it is a negative in the photographic sense, a footprint. The piece can be "played only by being like this": in an effort to correspond to the expressiveness that is being shown, the musician "must" get up from the piano stool to twist his/her torso, or hump him/herself on the handle of the double bass, or raise the elbows of the arms that hold the sax. They are all habits that, observed without participating in the game, become easy prey for ridicule and irony, but to which we correspond in turn performatively if we feel "colluded" in the game. The more one plays well in an improvisation the more his/her effort to resonate as a body (embodied mind) is taken to the extreme by intrinsically coupling with the instrument and the piece (extended mind), according to the needs of the overall field (embedded mind). And whoever has this aesthetic

competence (which is, in fact, a bodily pattern as impersonal as it is assumed as one's own, like one's voice grain) will manage to exercise it sometimes, regardless of this or that instrumental means. It's not really surprising, then, to see that great musicians know "all at once" how to improvise on the most diverse musical instruments or even without musical instruments, simply by manipulating trivial pieces of the world. Indeed, a primordial expressive organ turns out to be the voice in its indefinite balance between inside and outside.

Against this, well-disciplined music, however much it may challenge the performer's virtuosity, has long been able to dispense an equivalent body discipline. Almost economically, it made use of real musical "instruments" in all those executive practices that have been systematically perpetrated in the conservatories. It's almost like it wanted to declare its alignment on the side of an algid, abstract, and transparent mind, not compromised by corporeality, and of its formal rationality. The current way of performing even "conservatory music" is apparently freer. Perhaps, despite all the ambiguities of the spectacularization, this makes evident the subversive power of radical improvisation, which even infiltrates the territory where hypercoded pieces reign, to the extent that, with their execution, one wants to reach cells of primitive expressiveness. In these cases, sweat is literally necessary if one aspires to rejoin the virtual focus of the embodied and extended connection from which the sound flows as an aesthetic phenomenon. Here reverberates an improvised freedom, i.e. a formally gratuitous but materially constrained resonance, which even so-called classical music, if great, cannot fail to nurture. Its overturned image is the colorful and shiny uniforms displayed by performers who confuse all this with a mere show. They basically replace the musician's uniform that is heir to the servile livery with an even more servile celebration of a well-studied and convenient non-conformism.

7 To Sound and to Resonate

All this implies a particular conception of what we usually name "effect." In resonance phenomena, the so-called effect is not simply something that is caused, or even something that is passive with respect to an external activity. The peculiar status of resonance is due to the fact that within it there is no phenomenon without effect, nor something like a cause. Indeed, it intrinsically encompasses the effect. The outcome expresses the dynamic complex of a field that would otherwise remain outside the scope of experience. It is precisely because we become vectors of the field in which we are immersed that we enter into resonance with it expressing its effect. The agency is not to be ascribed to a supposed external input, but to the field as such in its own being carried out, in its working, *and* its effect. In order to understand this, we can focus on the distinction between sounding and resonating.

When a string "resonates," for instance, by being on pitch with the A of a tuning fork, its vibration is not simply provoked by the tuning fork that approaches it; it is actually corresponding to the tuning fork within a shared field whose vibrations involve both. The relationship between generation and manifestation of the phenomenon is not synthetic, as if it were between two heterogeneous entities that are a cause and an effect. It is analytical: the vanishing of one coincides with the disappearance of the other. That which is caused does not follow the act of causing it but is identified with it. That's why we say: "To go in resonance," and not (except in very technical phrases): "To be resonated." This is because the action of the tuning fork is not enough to produce the phenomenon. The resonant body must correspond to it with a characteristic of its own, which moreover manifests itself only in relation to the shared field. Both the tuning fork and the body that corresponds to it are resonant. It is not an action of cause or effect proper to one of them – so much so that it is reversible: a tuning fork resonates too when approached with a vibrating string on the right pitch. Resonance, therefore, belongs to the field in which both the "cause" and the "effect" take part as vectors.

Hence, to make a string "sound," for instance by pinching it, and to make it "resonate" are different phenomena. Between the finger that pinches (an action) and the sound emitted (an acoustic event) there is a difformity and therefore a causal transition from a cause to an effect. On the other hand, there is no such difference (indeed, there is intimate conformity) between the field of vibrations that radiates around an acoustic vector and what is immersed in it and which therefore corresponds according to its own characteristics.[6] As a matter of fact, any characteristic of the vectors reveals a way of appearing of the field according to an aspect. For example, it shows a complex of harmonics implicated in the vibration, but which, without that resonance, would not have manifested themselves, at least not in the way that is each time currently active. This element is exploited in some musical instruments such as the viola d'amore or the barytone, which have what are precisely called resonance strings, whose heirs are the aliquot strings in the piano as much as the so-called prepared piano.

Only obliquely does the string that vibrates because it has been plucked reveal something of the finger, of the hand, of the organism that pinched it; and the relationship is irreversible, we cannot invert the order of its factors. Instead, the string that resonates intrinsically reveals the characteristics of an energy field of resonance, or of the "manifestative" complex that involves it precisely as an aspect of it or a subset of aspects. The string becomes the voice of that field expressed according to the twist conferred by its own texture. Phenomenologically (not ontologically or empirically): (1) when a finger pinches a string, the sound is *provoked*; (2) when a resonance field incorporates a string, the sound is *evoked*. Proof of this is the fact that it is possible to correct and modulate directly the way one sounds by acting causally, but not the way of resonating (which exhibits an immanent "string"), whose manipulation is always vague and uncertain.

The history of musical instruments and performance practice seems to be a valid witness in this regard. Precisely in the 18th century – the century of the birth of both aesthetics and the notion of "fine arts" – some musical instruments were created and used while trying to subdue the dimension of resonance to the extreme, a dimension that previously was widely dominant in its own pregnant vagueness. The process parallels the introduction of increasingly refined temperament systems that will lead to the "equal" one. Also in the 18th century in the German area, where aesthetics was born in the context of rationalism, the "mysterious temperament" of Bach was of course a crucial step, but Andreas Werckmeister was already on this path, which moreover was clearly intuited by Leibniz himself. These new temperaments tended to progressively neutralize and sterilize "irrational" intervals and profusion of "random" harmonics. The transition was therefore from overall manifestative complexes to well-defined tonal developments. Thus the so-called "natural" harmony was abandoned and there was a new tendency towards a harmony of a physical-theoretical – and therefore artificial and orthopedic – kind, based on the paradigm of the *mathesis universalis* (twelve intervals exactly identical from the arithmetic point of view that form the "equal temperament"). From an ideal of holistic sonority, we then move on to the ideal of a sort of linear sonority. Instead, so to speak, of the musical *image*, a musical *language* takes prominence, which develops according to an order in which its character of rationalization is emphasized.

The distinction between sounding and resonating emerges here as a contrast between two different conceptions of composition: (1) as the ability to rule sounds (a cognitive competence with aesthetic implications) and (2) as the ability to express a resonance (an aesthetic competence with cognitive implications). And here we find the right place for radical improvisation. For the jazz performer will be more effective the more he/she will be able to stand expressively inside the resonance, to vibrate along with it, rather than generating grammatically correct sequences of sounds. It's a matter of constraints, not rules. This ability is very similar to what happens when a dispositional capacity is revealed, as it would be potentially immanent in the device, which, in its procedural praxis, expresses the same capacity. Moreover, Western music has privileged this

direction not only up to Bach's epoch, but also since the mid-20th century, as testified to by many post-dodecaphonic and neo-Dadaist musical avant-gardes.

We can metaphorically broaden the point by talking of two different ways of seeing creativity and artistic creation: (1) creativity as producing sounds stresses the intentional dimension and the rational control which suits a subjective intra-cranial and transparent mind; and (2) creativity as standing inside the resonance reveals the game of interaction between activity and passivity, namely, the overall manifestation of the twine configuration-material. The first one is an experience *of* a musical matter and the second is an experience *with* a musical material. The former tends to privilege and perimeter well-codifiable areas, as the fine arts have long been believed to be. The latter instead highlights the aesthetic practice in its potential diffusivity, in direct continuity with radical improvisation.

Consequently, as stated above, we need to contrast the tendential resolution of resonance in the effect of amplification.[7] For this reason, I suggested the image of the material resonance that occurs in the sounding board of a string instrument. Yet, we could also think about the experience of the Tibetan bell. The expressiveness that invests the interactants is not a content *of* their experience that is separable from them, but something they experience *with* and in which they feel extended. All the more so since the relationship between musician, instrument, and piece in musical improvisation embodies a type of expressiveness that is propagated in further vectors: from the listener to the critic. Thus, the typical structure of an aesthetic niche emerges, marking the mind as embodied and extended by virtue of its aesthetic creativity.

8 Improvisation as an Aesthetic Effect

Above, I stressed that resonance is an acoustic phenomenon that exists exclusively in its own performance, in its expression. Suddenly, as an improvisation. What is expressed is not perceptible either before or after or beyond the event. It finds precisely in the ongoing event its own resonance, and *therefore* its amplification. As a consequence, the experience of someone getting involved in this field, that is, the classic figure of the beholder, can't be understood by adopting the empathy model. The latter would lead to speaking of aesthetic experience as "embodied simulation,"[8] but there is nothing simulated here. Instead, it would be better to speak of the staging of an embodied and extended mind that resonates in the occurring interaction according to its own complex of aspects, neural system included.

The beholder's experience can be grasped starting from the formulation it finds in something that has the form of "the description of an aesthetic effect." The so-called aesthetic effect that we can get from, e.g. a piece of music indeed implies also a performance. It is not a nuclear state of affairs that we can simply denote as something that we face externally. It, rather, consists in the further effective development of an energy endowment that otherwise would not be experienceable. That's why sometimes we call it the "affective import." So, when the aesthetic effect is expressed in the form of a description, it is futile to look for the described content outside this manifestation. If I say: "This piano solo explores the depths of my soul," it is not simply a metaphorical description. It is not a description at all. It is an expressive configuration of a material: I actually mean that the piano solo, due to its material configuration, makes me have and undergo that experience which is the exploration of the depths of my soul. I don't explore anything. The (correspondence with the) solo explores; and this exploration wouldn't be otherwise accessible to me since it does not have content which can be explored as such. When the solo resonates, the depths of my soul correspond to it, they are evoked as a sound. And this cannot happen either "before" or "after," like a state of affairs I could properly describe. While description implies the possibility of rephrasing the same content *salva veritate*, it is only as I'm interacting with that solo that this exploration arises as its aesthetic effect. Improvisation as a twine configuration-material

implies this crucial element. When the performance stops, I would not be able to draw a map of "the depths of my soul" which I could later use or access. Any other expression of it could only carry out this interaction by analogy, renewing its configuration.

Therefore, if the description at issue is aesthetically effective, what is "described" appears to be tuned to itself: it resonates in the description, from which it is evoked rather than provoked. To accomplish aesthetic descriptions (or: an aesthetic effect as a description) we need an expressive language, as Merleau-Ponty puts it. The root of this kind of descriptions lies in the *elocutio*, to which the vectors involved in its own field are tuned. It is not *adaequatio*, but *expressio*. The effect should be understood as an expression, a presentation, not as something that is caused, the representation of a content. The first "description" of an improvisation's aesthetic effect is the way we behave during our listening. In this sense, music and dance are unavoidably intertwined. And it's not a matter of taste, if we take that to mean an instrumental ability that we can have (either innate or acquired). It's rather a matter of passively being constituted by the interaction we are corresponding to and that we didn't have at our disposal "before" the field as such emerges. The expressive component of this element is well exemplified whenever we look for the "right" word without being able to say which word we are constrained to use to accomplish our expressive task.

This opens up an interesting perspective on the relationship between the *dense* (in a topological sense: like a set of rational numbers) phenomenon of resonance and each of its *discrete* configurations (like a set of integers), both in images and in words. Instead of referring to a state of affairs that would be designated (or even provoked) by the enunciative act, or instead of representing it, resonance phenomena show an effect that is one with its own presentation. It is each time nothing but its own particular staging. Only by losing or forgetting their own propositional or representational function can word- and picture-systems become capable of expressing the musical material configuration of our experience in its sensible, aesthetic manifestation. The coincidence of form and content as a twine configuration-material – namely, the core of radical improvisation – thus, shows to be the core of the so-called aesthetic creativity, also as a receptive and interpretive exercise. This is what must be not only preserved, but also carried out by any "aesthetic judgment" that aims at being effective, whether it be a critical intervention or a variation on the theme created through means even inhomogeneous to the matrix of the theme itself. It expresses a figural articulation of the overall experiential interaction with an affective field, and it does so intransitively: a different "description" would indeed not succeed in replacing it by performing with the same efficacy the function it performs of "emphasizing or concentrating upon some object or some feature of an object" (Wollheim 1980: 95).

In these cases, a passage between expressive registers endowed with different densities (as perception, representation, and verbalization are) takes place. In order to be efficient, this passage must be "in tone." Namely, it must be attuned to a core of material configuration, a sort of residue of a radical improvisation, which is preserved at all levels. The key role is played by the resonating bistability of the field (a "how") instead of any propositional content (a "what"), by something that is meaningful yet lacking any designating function, just like music can be. From this resonance matrix is derived the paradigmatic role of *musical* improvisation for the creativity of the aesthetic in general. Only thanks to this musicality already embodied in perception does it become clear how much can be shared by different expressive practices. The soundtrack of Louis Malle's *Ascenseur pour l'échafaud,* created in a few hours by Miles Davis in 1957, is a masterful return effect of it. The downside is that, despite being expressed in a propositional form, the description of improvisation as a resonance phenomenon can never appeal to abstractly general categories without losing the aesthetic effect. It is bound to carry out a particular-universal field with further instances expressed by apparent judgments. That is, it must aim at making aesthetic experience occur (perceptualization), rather than at making something known (conceptualization).

It would seem to take the point too far if we were to say that the formally descriptive enunciation accomplishes the experience of an aesthetic effect. As long as it is a phenomenon of resonance, it is a question of not illocutory but elocutory acts, whose predicate intransitively exhibits the figure that the manifestative complex of experience takes on. It was not by chance that I spoke earlier of a baptism where the officiant-baptized reveals its proper name. Practicing these elocutory acts means moving within the framework of the *logos semantikos* (Aristotle 2002: 44–9; *De int*.: 16b–17a), which does not describe nor inscribe in the truth-falsity of a judgement what it expresses, as the *logos apophantikos* would do, but actually "puts it into effect," makes it "come" (not "be") true, carries out its resonance. According to a specific inflection bound to the medium, each "predicated" property is at the same time presented, it intervenes operationally as a resonating harmonic note, that is, it becomes perceivable and felt in a single act. The *elocutio* of these configurations has, therefore, the force of the *invitation* to make an experience *with* the aesthetic device (and *with* the whole field). They are invitations to perceptualize that reveal the performative character of *aisthesis*. They are invitations to share, to cooperate, to a common construction of an aesthetic niche. By virtue of their musical core, which guarantees power and effect, they give further way to improvisation as resonance.

Notes

1 I am indebted to two (extremely different) classical applications of the concept of field to aesthetic experience, such as Berleant 2001 and Bourdieu 1993.
2 I'm referring to the piece *Short Tales of the Black Forest* performed during the memorable live concert held by the two guitarists together with De Lucia in 1980 in San Francisco.
3 On the difficulty of applying the type/token scheme in a canonical way, see Bertinetto 2016a, in particular, chapter 3.
4 An attempt to illustrate this conception of creativity is Matteucci 2019b.
5 I sometimes also quote the original text, as it is not always perfectly respected by the English translator.
6 The key issue is what happens in the field of resonance as such, without considering any external cause that might have activated it. It doesn't matter whether, empirically, the latter event can or cannot be traced back to "sounding" instead of "resonating."
7 This is the limit, for instance, of the extensive research recently carried out on this concept by Rosa 2019.
8 For a critical treatment of this issue, see Brinck 2018.

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3

IMPROVISATION AS CREATIVE PERFORMANCE

Caterina Moruzzi

1 Improvisation Here, There, and Everywhere

When talking of improvisation, we often refer to a marginal aspect of improvisatory practices. The common view of improvisation relates to the image of a performer who starts playing, singing, dancing, or acting without following any pre-determined set of instructions. Although this is a way in which improvisatory practices may be delivered, so-called "free improvisation," in almost every tradition and in every art form there are more or less explicit improvisatory practices. In addition to performative arts, improvisation permeates also art forms such as painting and photography as well as non-art activities. A child that tells an intricate and outlandish lie to disguise her misdeeds is, indeed, improvising.

From this pervasiveness of improvisatory practices comes the necessity to give an account of the nature of improvisation which accommodates cases that lie also outside fields such as jazz or improvisational comedy which are more traditionally associated with it.[1] This need is even more compelling in the present day, given the emergence of new forms of art, including some that originate from the co-improvisation of humans with machines.

The main aim of this chapter is to counter the traditional ontological paradigm that sees work and performance as distinct entities, adopting instead improvisation as a model for the interrelationship between composition and performance. I will address how an independently motivated ontological theory, Musical Stage Theory (MST), can account for improvisation within its ontological framework, by shifting the focus from the product to the process and describing improvisation as a creative process that pervades many artistic activities. In the second part of the chapter, I present contemporary examples of the centrality of the performative dimension of artworks, describing improvisatory practices in art forms that emerge from the collaboration between humans and technology. As a byproduct of this discussion, I will argue how an analysis of improvisation in human-machine collaboration in the arts can help us also answer questions regarding creativity.

The focus of most of the arguments and examples in the following sections will be on music. This is due to the fact that the ontological account that the definition of the nature of improvisation is based on, i.e. MST, is, as the name suggests, a theory on the ontology of musical works. Nevertheless, this does not exclude the possibility of extending the considerations here developed to other art forms and to improvisatory practices in general.

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2 Many Improvisations

Despite the persistent presence of improvisatory practices in the performing arts and in other human activities, improvisation has been neglected by musicology until recently (Gould and Keaton 2000: 143). Even if improvisatory traditions continued to be present in various forms throughout all the history of music, it was only in the 20th century that improvisation saw a resurgence in musicological and ontological studies and this was mainly due to the role it played in jazz.[2]

The difficulty of including improvisation in an ontological analysis is due to the fact that the ontologies of art normally focus on the final product rather than on the process and they target unchanging and well-structured objects that can be readily labeled as works. Instead, improvisations are not well-rounded objects like paintings or sculptures.

The polysemous meaning of the term "improvisation" does not help achieve a clear-cut definition of the notion, either. Indeed, improvisation can be described both as a product and as a process. In a stage play of the Italian Commedia dell'Arte, for example, improvisation can be identified through the play itself, namely the final product, or through the actors' performance, i.e. a process.[3]

An even stronger factor of confusion when it comes to defining the nature of improvisation comes from the weak boundary existing between the notions of composition, performance, and improvisation.

We are used to associating the idea of improvisatory musical practices with the image of a performer who starts playing her instrument without any score but instead following her own idea of how she should go on and play. However, the two processes of improvisation and composition have many traits in common. Indeed, many elements that characterize the act of composition are present also in the act of improvisation, although there is not a perfect overlap between the two processes.[4]

In music, the reason that determined the interpretation of the acts of composition and improvisation as two detached and extraneous activities is an historical one. Before the 19th century, the score was conceived by both composers and performers as a sketch on which the composer notated a basic recipe for how the piece should sound. This sketch then needed an interpretative intervention on the part of the performer, whose active role was a necessary requirement in order for the work to be complete. There are various reasons that stand behind the increase in details present on musical notation- e.g. the origin of professional orchestras, the institutionalization of musical works as commodities, the increased geographical mobility of musicians, the rise of a new market of amateur musicians – and they concur with the significant changes that musical scores underwent during the 18th and 19th centuries (Goehr 1992: 224–34).

In the mid-1900s, improvisation started to be gradually reintegrated within composition; for instance, in some kinds of graphic notation in John Cage or Earle Brown's compositions, where the performer is provided with unusual suggestions, such as drawings, which she must interpret (Bailey 1992: 60). Even without considering extreme cases like these, though, a certain amount of improvisation is present in every translation of a score into sounds. Despite the efforts of composers, in fact, the notation of the score was and remained underdetermined. A score needs to be interpreted by performers and this interpretation certainly has aspects of improvisation in it.[5] Every time a musician performs a piece, in fact, she will make slightly different choices in regard to many aspects of it and often these choices are made on the spot, according to the mental and physical situation of the performer herself and in like with the inputs that she receives from the audience.[6] The acknowledgement of the influence of improvisatory practices on every rendition of a musical score into sounds is the first step towards the deconstruction of the idea of composition, performance, and improvisation as extraneous fields. As I will show in the second part of this chapter, the ever-growing use of technology in the creative sector is making this boundary even blurrier (Bertinetto 2016: 63).

It may be more beneficial to interpret the relation between improvisation and composition as a matter of degree.[7] At one end of the spectrum we can place a free improvisation that does not exploit patterns on which to elaborate.[8] At the other end, we have the composer sitting at her desk and thinking about the structure of her composition.

The literature that addresses the nature of improvisation reflects the difficulty of tracing the boundaries of this notion. Ontologies of art have the tendency of confining the objects of their enquiry to recognizable limits that can help them in framing their nature. This widespread tendency is one of the reasons for the obstacles that theorists find in describing the nature of improvisations. In the next sections, I will account for the struggles encountered by some of the main theories and, ultimately, I will suggest how all these difficulties may be avoided by dismissing ontologies that adopt as a paradigm of work the product, and by proposing, instead, an ontology that places at its core the process of artistic production.[9]

3 Ontology of Improvisation: A Quick Excursus

Improvisation has kept many scholars busy trying to define its nature and to include it within an ontology of art.[10] Due to its hybrid and ephemeral nature, however, the task has proven to be difficult to accomplish. Improvisations, in fact, do not have a fixed and prescribed set of instructions, like written works of music, poetry, or ballet dance steps. Neither are they amenable to the dualistic distinction between work and performance.[11] In improvisation, work and performance coincide in the spontaneous act of the performer.

Before the performer improvised, that sequence of sounds, words, or steps may have existed, but it would never have been performed in that particular way. It will never be performed in precisely this way again, at least, without giving away its status as an improvisation. Improvisations can indeed be used as models for subsequent performances. However, the performances deriving from an initial improvisation cannot be deemed improvisations themselves.[12] The relationship between the original improvisation and the possible instantiations that take it as a model, therefore, is not, strictly speaking, a repeatability relationship, as the concept of repeatability has traditionally been interpreted. In particular, theorists that prescribe a type-token distinction struggle to include improvisations within their theory.

The type-token model is one of the most widely accepted models in the ontology of art. Type-token theories are characterized by the distinction between an abstract entity, the type, which is instantiated multiple times by concrete entities, or tokens. For example, a musical work is an abstract type that is repeatable thanks to its instantiation in multiple concrete performances, or tokens (Dodd 2007). From this duality – "abstract versus concrete," "single versus multiple," – a first difficulty emerges. Indeed, admitting the possibility of several occurrences of a type would conflict with the nature of improvisation as a unique act. Therefore, type-token accounts have been deemed unsuitable for accounting for improvisations.[13]

A typical strategy for the type-token theorist is, following Philip Alperson (1984: 26) and Peter Kivy (2004: 99 ff.), to interpret an improvisation as a unique token of a type. For the type-token theorist, having only one token of a type is not particularly worrying. After all, there are many compositions that were performed just once. What differs in the case of improvisations, however, is that while in the case of an unperformed score, or of a score performed only once, there is nothing negating the possibility of it being repeated, improvisations are – by their very nature – unrepeatable.

In a similar way, theories that describe musical works as classes or fusions of performances, e.g. Musical Perdurantism, also struggle to include improvisations within their ontological frameworks. Indeed, they can account for improvisations only by allowing these classes to have just one element (Caplan and Matheson 2006). Theories that assign to the score, or more generally to the

set of instructions, an essential role for the identity of works, like Nelson Goodman's (Goodman 1968), would struggle even more, given the fact that there is no set of instructions against which the correctness of a performance can be compared. As a result, the impossibility for an improvisation to be repeatable and its ephemeral nature lead many scholars to the conclusion that improvisations cannot be deemed "works."[14]

Indeed, not everyone is willing to give improvisations the status of "works," preferring instead to highlight their transitory identity and focusing on the peculiar aspects of improvisation that distinguish it from other phenomena, instead of trying to make it fit within the paradigm of "work" at all costs.

A feature of improvisation that is highlighted by many as its distinctive aspect is spontaneity. Philip Alperson defines improvisation as a "spontaneous kind of music-making" (Alperson 1984: 20) while Alessandro Bertinetto describes it as a "process that unfolds while being created and attended to, an intentional production of sounds (and silences) 'on the spur of the moment,' that does not follow pre-established instructions for performance" (Bertinetto 2012b: 106). Other theorists, however, do not agree with the attribution of spontaneity to improvisation. While it is true that some improvised performances are completely spontaneous, most of them are based on a pre-determined pattern: "The guidelines can be quite loose and can provide musicians with a great deal of scope. […] Nevertheless, the performer who opts to follow the guidelines is under some constraints" (Young and Matheson 2000: 129).[15]

From this quick overview of some of the main accounts on the nature of improvisation, it is easy to see how a consensus on the topic is far from being established. Indeed, theories such as the type/token, the perdurantist, or the nominalist one cannot include improvisations within their ontological framework without making some *ad hoc* adjustments. For their part, instead, other scholars do not justify their description of improvisation through a specific ontological theory.[16]

Compensating for this absence is what I propose to do with the account of improvisation that I suggest in the next section. As I will explain, MST reshapes the discussion on the ontology of musical works, accounting for artistic practices and shifting the focus to the process of performing. Thus doing, improvisation becomes an exemplar for works of music and it can, by all means, occupy a place of honor in the ontological structure offered by this theory.

4 Musical Stage Theory as an Ontology of Improvisation

Generally, most of the problems concerning the definition of improvisation result from a desire to describe it in terms of a repeatable entity which fits into the paradigm of more traditional kinds of works. If this aim disappears, then other problems disappear and, as a result, it is still possible to analyze improvisations within an ontology of artworks and, more precisely, within an ontology of musical works: MST.

MST challenges the traditional concept of musical work and gives prominence to the sonic/performative dimension, with the aim of recognizing the relevance of the performer's role in the nature of works.[17] The revisionary thesis of MST disrupts the division existing between performance, composition, and work. Indeed, the central claim of MST is that a musical work is a performance (referred to as "work-as-performance") and the nature of the work is explicated in its sonic-performative aspect. As a consequence, strictly speaking, every performance is a different work. One of the consequences identifying musical works with performances is that they cannot be repeatable, if, for repeatability, we adopt the traditional meaning of having multiple instantiations. Indeed, the ontological nature of the work-as-performance consists in an event that occurs in the immediateness of the present and, thus, cannot be repeated.

Yet, MST needs to somehow mitigate its revisionary stance to acknowledge that the act of grouping performances together according to a certain relationship also plays a role in our

discussions about music (Moruzzi 2019: 417). Every performance is, thus, described as being related to its counterparts through the repeatability-relation: "a privileged 'horizontal' relation between different entities explains what is commonly understood as repeatability, that is a 'vertical' relation between a work-type and its exemplars" (Moruzzi 2018a: 344). Through this strategy, then, MST can explain how our linguistic attitudes shift between the reference to works-as-performances, to a more general concept of work – what is called the "work-as-construct." For example, when I say, "I am listening to Brahms' *Fourth Symphony,*" I am referring to a work-as-performance – what for MST is, strictly speaking, the work. If instead I say, "Brahms' *Fourth Symphony* has been performed many times in this concert hall," I am referring to a collection of performances, related through a repeatability-relation, which are part of the work-as-construct.[18]

The revisionary nature of the claim given by MST that musical works should be identified as performances arises in contradistinction to the idea of "work" transmitted by the Classical tradition that we most commonly have in mind when thinking about music.[19] Still, if we acknowledge the relevance of improvisatory practices and of other practices of elaboration of the score, the identification of what we call "work" with the single rendition given by performers would not sound as counterintuitive as it may seem. On the other hand, with its focus on the delivery of the piece instead of the process of its composition and its undermining of the traditional work-like concept, MST is able to account for the flexibility applied to music throughout its history and also to grant the necessary relevance to the role played by performers and by their improvisations.

As discussed in previous sections, the impossibility of being instantiated more than once was one of the concerns that prevented other theories from accounting for improvisations. MST does not have this problem. Within its framework, improvisations can be deemed musical works as much as other performances. Indeed, for the ontological account offered by MST, at the level of the work-as-performance there is no distinction between improvisations and performances of pre-written compositions. Contrary to aesthetic empiricism, for MST the cultural context and the history of production are not part of the ontological nature of the work. Thus, an improvisation and a live performance are not distinguishable by their different history of production. The ontological nature of the work/performance is in its *hic et nunc* essence, immediately graspable by a potential audience, and not in the history of production or in the sound structure. Therefore, it is not repeatable. What is needed for something to be counted as a work, or, more precisely, as a work-as-performance, is that it is a sonic product, intentionally created and performed, and which is immediately graspable by a potential audience (Moruzzi 2018a: 342). In their immediateness, improvisations are musical works *par excellence*.

Following the ontology offered by MST thus, we can define improvisations as works-as-performances, as one-off events the nature of which is not dependent on the relation that they bear to other performances or sets of instructions. They share the essential traits of their ontological nature with that of performances, where with "performances" we mean not merely musical performances but events that share most of the features that characterize accomplishments: performances occur in time, have a goal, have temporal boundaries, can be complete or incomplete, and can be done quickly or slowly (Vendler 1957; Kenny 1963).

The focus that MST places on musical works does not prevent us from applying the tools that it offers to the analysis of other art forms. The identification of the work with the performance can be easily adapted to all performative arts, as well as to every activity that incorporates improvisatory practices. The ontology of MST allows to consider each process in isolation (be it a musical, theatrical, or dance performance, as well as a painting, sculpting, writing, or photographing one) and to recognize it as a "work-as-performance." As a process, improvisations can of course also be interpreted as such and their status is no more inferior than that of more traditional and prefixed forms of art.

Improvisations are paradigmatic of the shift of focus operated by MST from the product to the process. Specifically, improvisations are creative processes, because their creation calls for a

creative endeavor on the part of the performer, who extemporaneously needs to make decisions in respect to their temporal and sonic structure (Canonne 2018: 11).

In the next section I will argue in favor of the relevance of shifting the focus onto the process when considering the ontology of art, presenting art forms of human-AI interaction where the performative process of improvisation constitutes the core of their essence. The creative aspects of improvisations, displayed in the interaction between humans and machines in these forms of improvisation that I will present, may provide us with the means to better understand where this creativity lies and how it presents itself.

5 Improvisation and Creativity in Human-Machine Interaction

The increasingly common use of Artificial Intelligence (AI) for the generation of content has brought it closer to areas of application that, until not so long ago, were considered the prerogative of humans. Artists have been using AI to create art since the 1960s (the program AARON by Harold Cohen is just one of the most famous examples) but it is only recently that artworks created by AI have gained the attention of the general public.[20]

In the musical sector, David Cope's Experiments in Musical Intelligence raised a lot of interest in the 1990s, together with a lot of harsh criticism. And, more recently, there has been an increase in the number of software for music composition: AIVA technologies, Google Magenta, and Sony's Flow Machines are the major players in a basin full of start-ups and smaller companies.

I defined the creative sector as an area that is traditionally conceived to be paradigmatically human, in part because humans seem to be the only animals that engage with the arts and take pleasure from this activity, and in part because it requires some abilities that machines seem to presently lack.[21] There is a rich literature on the topic of creativity and its definition. A consensus on what creativity is has not been reached, though. Instead, scholars propose a number of different properties that they present as necessary for creativity: novelty (Amabile 1996; Guilford 1950; Simonton 2008), originality (Runco 1988; Bridy 2012), value (Boden 2004), autonomy (Moruzzi 2018b), and others. The difficulty in finding a single definition of creativity that everybody can agree on is motivated by the fact that the notion of creativity can be interpreted in different ways: as a subjective or as an objective property (Dewey 1934; Newell et al. 1962; Nanay 2014), as the property of a product or of a process (Elton 1995; Nanay 2014), as a property that can be explained computationally (Simon 1985), or as something that cannot be defined (Minsky 1982).

With respect to the last one, it is easy to see how the difficulty that already exists in defining creativity cannot but increase when analyzing not human but machine creativity. On the one hand, there are theorists who support the possibility of AI being creative (Newell et al. 1962; Simon 1985) but, on the other hand, there are detractors or people who are hesitant to acknowledge this possibility (Amabile 1996; Kelly 2019).

As I claimed in the previous sections, I deem improvisation a significant mark of creativity. Indeed, in improvisatory practices we find many elements that are traditionally recognized as constituents of creativity. I already mentioned how spontaneity is considered by many a distinctive aspect of improvisation – it is a facet common also to creative processes.[22] In addition, improvisation displays many of the features that have been associated above with creativity, e.g., originality, surprise, and value, and it shares with creativity a considerable semantic richness.[23] Even more importantly, improvisation focuses on the process that is undertaken by the artists, and not on the final product. The consideration of the process rather than the product is a key factor in avoiding biases and misconceptions when evaluating creativity, especially in respect to machines (Boden 2010; Moruzzi 2018b).

I argue that an evaluation of improvisation can be a useful undertaking in order to better consider whether a process is creative, since it is easier to assess whether a system can improvise than to assess its creativity (Sawyer 2000a: 150). This is even more relevant in the case of artificial

creativity, which, as mentioned, is still a contentious and scarcely explored topic. If a machine is deemed to be able to improvise, then, I argue that we may have grounds for regarding it as creative.

In the next sections, I examine two examples in new and different areas of art in order to consider how humans and machines interact through improvisatory practices. The scope of these examples is to show both the pervasiveness of improvisation, highlighting new aspects of it that emerge from human-machine interactions, and how the focus in these art forms shifts – even more considerably than in more established art forms – from the product to the process.

6 Against the Composition-Improvisation Boundary: Live-Coding

Musical live coding is a form of musical performance that involves the real-time writing of source-code to create sound. Thor Magnusson, an expert in the field of music composition through digital media, describes live coding as an extension of the traditional musical score and as a real-time improvised composition (Magnusson 2011: 19 ff.). Indeed, improvisation is integral to live coding, as the latter is, by its own nature, an on-the-fly and spontaneous composition of sounds (Krekovič 2019: 7). During a live coding performance, the performer/composer writes and edits code on a system called the "interpreter," using a PC or laptop as a musical instrument. Most of the time the code is projected on a wall so that the audience can follow the composing process of the artist.

A live coding performance requires the performer to make decisions on the spot as to how the musical piece will develop. The live coder can indeed evaluate and edit the code while the music is playing, thus changing the direction of the piece through the constant feedback that she gets from the sounds produced by the code (Goldman 2019: 284). The distance between composition, performance, and improvisation becomes then almost indiscernible: "The novelty of live coding is not simply that composition has become a real-time activity but also that the compositional tool is brought forth to the degree that it is seen as a musical composition in and of itself" (Magnusson 2011: 22).

Just as in more traditional performances, though, in live coding as well improvisation can be of different forms. "Free-improvisation" can take place if the artist does not rely on pre-determined patterns of code and instead just follows the inspiration of the moment. At the opposite extreme, we can also listen to a performance where the code has already been entirely written and, thus, where the live-coder just performs what was prepared earlier. In this case, the gap between composition, performance, and improvisation broadens and the live-coding performance assumes the traits of a performance of a pre-determined score. In between these two extremes we find what is maybe the most common form of live coding – namely, the one in which the live coder prepares in advance only patterns or short sections of code that she uses as inspiration and upon which she improvises on the spot (Krekovič 2019: 7 f.). This is indeed also the method that is most often adopted in improvisation in other musical genres, like jazz.

Although live coding as a form of music making is relatively new – the first instances date back to two decades ago – varied are the techniques and methods that have already been developed to enrich the improvisational experience of the performer and, thus, to intensify the creative potential of this system (Krekovič 2019). Manifold are also the interrogatives and issues that the practice of live coding is raising from a musicological and philosophical perspective. For instance, compelling is the question of the relation between the coder and her instrument in terms of embodiment. In the literature, many are the works that consider the role of embodiment not only in the perception of music but also in the relationship that is formed between the performer and her instrument (Corness 2008; Leman and Maes 2014). In the case of live coding, the instrument is a keyboard (as hardware) and a code interpreter (as software). It can be argued that the manipulation of the sounds that the live coder can perform is much more disembodied in respect to the control that a performer can have on an "analogic" instrument (Goldman 2019).

More relevant for the discussion in this chapter are the reflections on the pervasiveness of improvisation in new art forms and on the weak boundary between composition, performance, and improvisation that emerge from the investigation of the phenomenon of live coding. In a sense, live coding exemplifies the strong link that exists between composition and performance. In addition, it restores, in part, the role that performers had in the past in the Western tradition and still have in other musical traditions: not just as someone who slavishly executes what has been written by others but as a composer in all respects, who masters the art of producing and shaping new sound structures on the go.

Live coding is an example of how the experimentation with new methods of improvisation and interaction between humans and technology can open up new paths towards forms of creativity heretofore unknown (Sawyer 2000a; Dudas 2010). Technology, in this sense, is breaking boundaries, both in respect to the composition/performance dichotomy and in respect to the possibility of humans and machines creatively interacting. And while it can be argued that the interaction between human and machine in live coding is relatively weak, since the computer is mostly used as an instrument rather than as a collaborator in possession of its own agency, other research done in the field of music improvisation shows how a deeper level of collaboration is possible.[24]

The next example explores precisely how deep this collaboration can go, with the aim of extending the results of this investigation outside the art world to the everyday interaction that we can have with machines and other forms of intelligence.

7 Improvised Paintings: Sougwen Chung

Improvisation is more often associated with performative arts such as music, theatre, or dance. However, improvisatory practices can be found also in other kinds of arts (Bresnahan 2015: 575; McCormack and D'Inverno 2016: 103). The example that I discuss in this section shows how improvisation can be an essential component in the process of drawing and painting. In particular, the improvisatory process in question involves collaboration between humans and technology. The human that makes this possible is the artist and researcher Sougwen Chung.[25]

In her work, Chung, a former researcher at MIT's Media Lab and current artist-in-residence at Bell Labs, explores the dynamics of interactions between humans and artificial systems through real-time, improvised drawing performances. These performances, showcased all around the world, exhibit an improvised co-creation that produces a drawing artifact as the final product.

An example of her work is the ongoing series of *Drawing Operations* that started in 2014. This project is a speculation on artificial creativity and on the mimicry and memory of the robotic arm that collaborates with Chung in creating the drawing. The movements of the robotic arm are generated by neural nets that are trained on Chung's gestures and previous drawings, as well as on images coming from historical archives and contemporary artists.[26] The mimicry of Chung's movements happens during the performances in real-time and the co-creation between the human and the robot develops on the go, in an improvisatory fashion. The context and the behaviors that emerge from this performance are a crucial element of the collaborative process and of the end product:

> The robot mimics the artist like a partner in improvisational round singing performance. It is an AI that embraces every glitch, bug, and error. The drawing session, without pre-established harmony, frees itself from aesthetic constraints, while also examining the essence and phenomenon of beauty at the same time.[27]

Technology becomes an instrument by which improvisation is included in art forms where, instead, the focus has traditionally been on the final product rather than on the process of creation.

As in the case of live coding, the example of Chung's work shows how the employment of artificial systems for creative endeavors is changing the traditional nature of art forms and how improvisation plays a key role in this transformation.[28]

Chung explicitly regards co-creation as a way of understanding AI and of exploring the possible modes of interaction between humans and AI. The "creative partnership" that Chung conceives and initiates allows us not only to explore human-robot interaction but also to reframe the "conventional narrative assigned to artificial intelligence."[29] This is essential for the historical moment that we are living in, one characterized by an increased pervasiveness of technology which, as a consequence, is giving rise to biased and typified interpretations of the role of technology and of our relationship to it, which are not always correct nor beneficial.

The risks of not having a beneficial relationship with AI may derive from two opposite phenomena: (i) the over-hyping of AI that sets too high expectations on what it may achieve, which can then be easily let down and (ii) the negative biases against AI that may lead us to dismiss every kind of its achievements, even the ones that may be interesting and/or beneficial. To this it should be added that it is necessary, in order to achieve an optimal relationship with AI, to achieve a sufficient amount of understanding. This understanding should come from both directions: AI needs to develop its capacity of understanding humans but humans also need to better understand AI.[30] Research studies such as the one conducted by Chung can help us increase our level of understanding of AI. By analyzing art production from AI we could in fact better understand how AI interprets and interacts with human actions and how it elaborates and actuates the concept of producing art. Again, creativity comes to the fore here: considering whether and how AI can be creative could give us a deeper level of insight in respect to the underlying mechanisms that motivate the machine's actions.

In the case of the artistic partnership resulting from the human-robot collaboration here described, improvisation extends beyond its traditional borders in a remarkable way. Not only as a tool for creative exploration, improvisatory practices become a way to delve deeper into the topical question of what the role of technology in our contemporary world is and how we should relate to it.[31]

In the ontology offered by MST the distinction between composition, performance, and improvisation is weakened. As showed by the two examples here presented, in contemporary art forms as well the use of technology is contributing to making this division even fainter. Thus, the framework provided by MST is suitable to understanding and contextualizing established and emergent kinds of improvisation, offering improvisation equal, if not higher, status than other artistic forms.

Further research is needed as new forms of art emerge and, with them, new forms of improvisatory practices. Art is moving away from the paradigm of static and prefixed art forms towards more flexible and fluid models where improvisation occupies a decisive role. In order for this investigation to be successful, though, it is necessary to acknowledge the pervasiveness of improvisatory practices and to recognize the relevance of the process alongside the product for the nature of established and emerging art forms.

Related Topics

Wilson, A. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Authenticity in Early 20th Century Western Music."

Notes

1 See Bresnahan 2015: 573 f. Arguably, most of the literature on improvisation focuses on improvisation in jazz, see Baker 1988; Berliner 1994; Brown 1996; Carvalho 2010; Hagberg 2008; Iseminger 2010; Monson 1996; Reeves 1989; Young 2018; Young and Matheson 2000.

2 For a discussion on of how improvisation survived also through the Classical period through the practice of virtuosos, see Goehr 1992: 188. See also Bertinetto 2016: 45 and Wilson, this volume.

3 See Alperson 1984: 17; 2010: 273; Bertinetto 2016: 52; Sawyer 2000a: 122; 2000b: 149; Stover 2013 for improvisation as a process and/or as a product.
4 See Bertinetto 2012b: 111 f. for a quick report on divergent views in regards to the relation between improvisation and composition. See also Alperson 1984: 19; Bertinetto 2016: 52, 63, 121; Bresnahan 2015: 574 ff.; Clarke and Doffman 2018; Dudas 2010: 29 f.; Krekovič 2019: 3 ff.
5 The score is a text that essentially needs to be interpreted (see Predelli 1995; Dodd 2012). In this sense, the distinction between score and performance can be paralleled to the discussion between text and act.
6 Another very interesting consideration to make is how the listening experience change in relation to how we think the music was produced, namely, whether it is an improvisation or a performance of a pre-written composition. See Bertinetto 2016: 52, 170 and Canonne 2018 on this topic.
7 See Alperson 1984: 22; Bertinetto 2012b: 107; 2016: 59; Sawyer 2000a: 149. The nebulous boundary between composition and improvisation will emerge also from the examples of improvisation in human-machine collaboration that I present in following sections.
8 It can also be disputed that a completely free improvisation is possible. Every improvisatory practice, in fact, however seemingly free it may be, is always constrained by a series of culturally encoded patterns that allow the performance to "sound good." Only if we had a random sequence of notes could we say that it is a "pure" improvisation. But then the issue would be to account for the ontology of this random choice. For a discussion on free improvisation, see Bailey 1992: 87 f.; Bertinetto 2016: 72; Canonne and Garnier 2011. See also Ruta 2017 for an account of free improvisation as non-interpretative performance.
9 See also Bertinetto 2016: 7–8, 214, 324.
10 I will be quick in the overview of the theories of improvisation, since the main aim of the chapter is not criticizing other views on improvisation but instead showing how MST accounts for it. For a more detailed discussion on the topic, see Alperson 1984; Bresnahan 2015; Brown 1996; 2000; Gould and Keaton 2000; Hagberg 1998; Lewis and Piekut 2016; Love 2016; Magnus 2016; Sterritt 2000; Valone 1985; Young and Matheson 2000.
11 By using "work" and "performance" here I do not refer necessarily to musical works and performances, but to every kind of art that requires an agent and a final product. This is not limited to performing arts; in painting and sculpture as well it is indeed possible to individuate both a work and a performer, namely, the painting/sculpture and the artist.
12 This claim needs a specification. The non-repeatability of the original improvisation affects the identity of the performances that use it as a model. That is, unlike what happens with traditional works, if an improvisation is used as a model for further performances, the latter cannot be deemed improvisations. I acknowledge that not everybody may agree with the claim that improvisations are not repeatable (see Ruta 2017: 514 ff. against the unrepeatability of improvisation). I will come back to this point in the next section when I talk about how MST addresses the issue of repeatability. See Bertinetto 2012b: 106–22; 2016b: 115, 133, 166 on the non-repeatability of improvisation.
13 See Bertinetto 2012b: 109–10; 2016: 113–60; Breshanan 2015: 577 f.; Hagberg 2000: 96.
14 Andrew Kania, Stephen Davies, and Lee B. Brown all agree in respect to this (see Bresnahan 2015: 578).
15 See also Gould and Keaton 2000: 147; Kania 2011: 395.
16 This may not necessarily be deemed a serious shortcoming if one is more interested in individuating the distinctive aspects of improvisatory practices instead of including them within an independent ontological theory. However, I argue that the inclusion of the definition of improvisation within an ontological account has the benefit of granting improvisation a relevant status, recognizing the impact that it can have in shaping the nature of art forms to which it is applied, as we will see when examining the case of human-machine co-improvisation.
17 See also Bertinetto 2016: 5.
18 For reasons of space I cannot discuss of MST in detail. For an in-depth exploration of its claims see Moruzzi 2018a; 2019.
19 I am referring here to "intellectual" music, not to popular traditions.
20 See also the images produced by CANs and which were presented at ArtBasel 2016 (Elgammal et al. 2017), the Next Rembrandt project (accessible at https://www.nextrembrandt.com (accessed October 26, 2020)), and the portrait *Edmond de Belamy, from La Famille de Belamy*, generated by the Parisian collective *Obvious* and sold for $432,500 at Christie's in October 2018. On the topic of AI and creativity see also Moruzzi 2020 and Moruzzi 2021.
21 Although it is now increasingly recognized that also certain animals are capable of creative thinking, see Kaufman 2015; Mendes et al. 2007.
22 See Alperson 1984: 17; 2010: 274; Breshanan 2015: 573–80.
23 See Breshanan 2015: 579; Lewis and Lovatt 2013: 47; McCormack and D'Inverno 2016: 102.

24 See for example Collins 2010; McCormack and D'Inverno 2016. However, not everybody agrees that a true collaboration is possible, see Lopes 2001.
25 More detailed examples of Chung's work can be found on her website, at https://sougwen.com (accessed October 26, 2020).
26 See https://sougwen.com/interview-2018-mitpropspaper (accessed October 26, 2020).
27 Accessible at https://sougwen.com/machinecollaboration (accessed October 26, 2020). See also https://www.bell-labs.com/var/articles/discussion-sougwen-chung-about-human-robotic-collaborations/ (accessed October 26, 2020).
28 It can be argued that, in the interaction between humans and machines, only humans are improvising (Lopes 2001: 76). The one on the impossibility for machines to create randomness is an ongoing debate, see https://engineering.mit.edu/engage/ask-an-engineer/can-a-computer-generate-a-truly-random-number/ (accessed October 26, 2020). While I grant that this is largely true, research is moving towards improving creative capacities in artificial systems and, with creativity, these systems are also developing improvisatory and intuitive abilities, see Lehman et al. 2018 and https://www.quantamagazine.org/how-to-turn-a-quantum-computer-into-the-ultimate-randomness-generator-20190619/ (accessed October 26, 2020).
29 See https://sougwen.com/interview-2018-mitpropspaper (accessed October 26, 2020). See also Aucouturier and Canonne 2017.
30 Here I refer in particular to the problem of transparency, see Beaudouin et al. 2020; Yampolskiy 2019.
31 See Huang et al. 2019; Fiebrink 2011; Laurenzo 2008; Sebe et al. 2004 for examples of how human-computer interaction can enhance creativity.

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4

MATERIAL AND IMPROVISATION IN THE FORMATIVE PROCESS

Robert T. Valgenti

1 Introduction

This chapter examines the role of the artist's material in the process of improvisation, as detailed in the aesthetic theory of Luigi Pareyson (1918–91). Pareyson begins from the not-uncontroversial premise that all artistic creation necessarily involves improvisation; moreover, he explains how improvisation occurs in the artist's encounter with material during the early stages of the creative process when the work of art first emerges from the artist's preparations, sketches, and even failed attempts. Building on the established body of scholarship that, in various ways, critiques the devaluing of improvisation as a form of composition, I argue that Pareyson's account of the role of material in improvisation explains how new works of art are possible. To that end, I will first outline some of the general contours of the theoretical research dedicated to improvisation in order to identify some of its problematic presuppositions. I will then present Pareyson's aesthetic theory of "formativity," with particular attention given to the role of improvisation during the initial stages of artistic creation. I then turn to the material of the work of art. Pareyson's understanding of the role that the material of the work of art plays within the creative process opens up a neglected avenue of investigation – namely, material as the key to understanding how new works of art are possible. New works are neither simply old forms in a new context, nor are they works created *ex nihilo*, nor are they simply material that has received the inimitable stamp of an artist's unique style and vision. The creation of new forms is possible because the material of art activates opportunities for the artist that emerge through improvisation: not only unforeseen possibilities but ones that are the very condition for yet-to-be seen works of art.

2 Improvisation and Composition

While the literature on improvisation in the arts is vast and varied, it is worth listing several generally accepted features of improvisation in order to highlight some of their latent presuppositions. For example, it is widely held that improvisation involves artistic choices that are spontaneous or arise in the moment (Alperson 1984; Gioia 1987; Brown 2000; Hamilton 2000; Sawyer 2000; Young and Matheson 2000); its relative success requires a level of skill or fluency in known forms and idioms that achieve a certain freedom through imposed limitations (Cochrane 2000; Gould and Keaton 2000; Soules 2004; Campesi 2015); it often involves a co-presence or social interaction with other artists, an audience, culture and tradition, or even the work itself (Borgo 2002; Neal 2004; Soules 2004; Sawyer 2015); and it participates in a feedback-loop of performance in

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which "the fundamental features of both the activity and of the product of that activity are determined in the very doing of the activity" (Alperson 2010: 273; see also Nettl and Russell 1998; Pressing 1998; Hagberg 2006; Bertinetto 2010). These broadly accepted features are still, in my view, over-determined by a more traditional notion of the work of art and artist that, to varying degrees: (a) depict the artist as the primary protagonist behind the creation of the work; (b) neglect the necessary contribution made to the formation of works by the material the artist chooses; and (c) rely on a notion of time that understands improvisation, as its etymology suggests, in relation to the unforeseen possibilities of the future. Pareyson's aesthetics of improvisation problematizes the first two presuppositions and, as I will argue, reveals the conditions of possibility for any new work of art.

Pareyson's starting point is his unambiguous placement of improvisation at the origin of a work of art, thus pre-empting one of the central questions concerning the artistic value of improvisation: does improvisation constitute its own artistic composition, or is it merely a type of performance derivative of more established works of art? Variations of this dichotomy include: improvisation as a singular work vs. improvisation as a singular performance of a work; improvisation as a form of creative composition vs. improvisation as a mode of embellishment on such creations; or, to utilize a distinction critiqued by many theorists, improvisation as an example of a type (or "mega-type") vs. improvisation as a token or example of such a type (Alperson 1984). Most recent work on improvisation has, in various ways, favored the inclusion of improvisation within broadly construed definitions of composition and the work of art (Nettl 1974; Tirro 1974; Bailey 1993; Nettl and Russell 1998; Brown 2000; Hamilton 2000; Sawyer 2000; Alperson 2010; Bertinetto 2012a; Goldoni 2013). These positions unfold, in some cases, as a purely theoretical and aesthetic investigation; however, a substantial body of criticism also vindicates improvisation's ability to critique social, political, and economic hegemonies (Durant 1989; Borgo 2002; Fischlin and Heble 2004; Benson 2006a; 2006b; Chapman 2018). In both cases, these defenders of the compositional merit of improvisation expose the shortcomings of positions grounded upon more traditional ideas of the work of art, the artist, and the relation with an audience. Such positions rely on an implicit dichotomy that privileges one side (typically, the artist or the enduring composition) while devaluing the other.[1] Nonetheless, as theorists bring composition and improvisation closer together (or dissolve the distinction outright), other conceptual and practical complexities arise and the very definition of improvisation poses challenges and potential contradictions that resist easy reconciliation (Hamilton 2000; DiPiero 2018). The first among these concerns improvisation's relation to time – its historical references and its future possibilities.

Gould and Keaton (2000) provide two insights worthy of consideration, arguing that all musical interpretation involves improvisation and that "improvisation is conceptually independent of spontaneity" (145). Their argument is not without its issues, as it never seems to grant improvisation the possibility of achieving the status of being its own work; nonetheless, by showing that the difference between the performance of a piece of classical music and an improvised jazz performance is merely one of degree, rather than one of kind, they challenge the notion that the essential characteristic of improvisation is spontaneity or unpredictability, which "is to conflate the notion of spontaneity with fluency" (147). Fluency, rather than spontaneity, is the source of the performance's novelty. So rather than measure the performance (token) against a compositional work (type), the "type" is replaced with what the authors refer to as a "score" (147): not in the traditional sense of a musical score, but rather as a body of ideas or a set of practices that is both the source and the measure of the performance. Rather loosely, this "score" can be understood as the living context of tradition, musical forms, cultural values, etc. within which any work or performance is born and acquires its meaning, even though that context itself is never fully explicated or revealed except through its many iterations.

These two claims – that improvisation occurs in reference to an extant or implicit "score" and that "improvisation is conceptually independent of spontaneity" – suggest affinities with two unique aspects of Pareyson's reflections on the material of art: (1) the material chosen by the artist operates as a necessary and determining set of background conditions for any new work; and (2) that the unforeseeable element in improvisation points not only to the future of a possible new work but rather to this pre-existing manifold of untapped possibilities already at work in the lives of the artist and the material she addresses. Rather than argue that improvisation stands on its own as a form of composition, Pareyson shows that it is a necessary feature in the creation of new works of art and that it arises through a particular encounter with the material of the work.

3 The Work of Art: From Personal Style to Pure Form

The philosophy of Luigi Pareyson has already garnered a good deal of attention from Italian scholars working on improvisation (see Bertinetto 2010; 2012b; Campesi 2015; Zanetti 2015). Pareyson's masterwork *Estetica: Teoria della formatività* explains the work of art in terms of its formative qualities: art is a type of doing that, "in the course of doing, invents its way of doing" (Pareyson 1988: 18).[2] Any completed work, as "formed form" (*forma formata*) (75 f.), is the realization of the process of forming such that the end product is not simply an object that has been imbued with a new shape, but rather a form in the sense of a physical work that accomplishes its intrinsic and self-imposed end. Such work can be reduced neither to the intention of the artist nor the qualities of the material out of which it is composed: the "work" of a work of art, "the activity that it specifies for itself, always involves that process of production and invention that constitutes the forming, and all works, as results, are forms endowed with independence and exemplarity" (Pareyson 1988: 19). For Pareyson, all human activity is formative and reflects the fundamentally interpretative structure of the human relation to truth.[3] Scientific inquiry, philosophy, moral action, and art are all bearers of a truth that, distinct from merely subjective or ego-centered theories, arises through the formative process. Each activity produces its own laws or norms to guide its practice and, in a certain sense, their truths are never complete and always open to re-interpretation. Art, however, plays a unique role in Pareyson's philosophy. Any work of art is both singular and also universal due to its exemplarity (Zanetti 2015; Valgenti 2018) as a formative activity – a distinction achieved because it releases the formative process from any goals that are extrinsic to the formative process itself. Pareyson does not simply theorize "art for art's sake," but construes artistic performance as an encounter with physical material that produces an autonomous work or "pure form."

Pareyson's *Estetica* provides a short but detailed examination of improvisation's essential role in the production of artistic works. The brief section on improvisation (less than 800 words) appears in the second chapter entitled "The Formation of the Work of Art," which documents the process through which a work of art comes into being. The placement of improvisation early within this process is important, as it marks the moment when the artist first stands before the work of art as an autonomous form – the moment in which the multitude of possibilities brought to light in the artist's encounter with material gives way to an actual work that transcends the limitations of each. And while the individual style and spirit of the artist are essential to a work of art, Pareyson specifies that the artist is not the sole protagonist in the formation.

Early in *Estetica,* Pareyson establishes that the "content" (*contenuto*) or subject matter of any work of art (as distinct from its physical material and the material that comprises artifacts of tradition, technique, etc.) is synonymous with the style, personality, or what Pareyson describes as the interior, spiritual life of the artist: "Style is its own content, namely, spirituality that makes itself a way of forming" (1988: 36). Here I disagree with Campesi (2015: 279), who conflates content (*contenuto*) with material (*materia*), or at least does not draw enough of a distinction between them, as is crucial in Pareyson's depiction of the artist's individual style. The content is not simply the

theme, argument, or subject of the work of art, as these would merely be art *about* something else, rather than a means by which to express the vision of the artist. Thinking artistically – that is, in terms of form for the sake of pure form itself – requires an individual to initiate the formative process by bringing the content into conversation with the chosen material. For Pareyson, the concept of "the person" (*la persona*) depicts this individual as a lived synthesis of singularity and universality who is constituted through an ever-unfolding process of interpretation – at once, a distinct self and an open-ended and developing self-work (*auto-opera*) (1985: 200). And while all such individuals and the content they produce share a "universally recognizable validity," they remain distinct through an "exercise of alterity" that resists the reduction of one individual to another (1985: 176–90). Pareyson's description of the person as a singular yet universal work that undergoes continual development through an encounter with alterity mirrors how he describes the work of art. And even though improvisation typically highlights the artistry and vision of the individual artist in performance – the inspired instrumental soloist, the quick-witted improvisational comedian, the fluidity of a dancer, the photographer with an eye for the unexpected shot, etc. – the artist's unique perspective does not suffice to explain the formation of new works of art, as they would merely be the imposition of a singular view upon available material rather than a real encounter with alterity.

The work of art, as a pure form, reveals truth only when it does more than merely express the artist's personal style and, likewise, does more than merely represent the physical or cultural material taken up by the artist. The artist is, therefore, neither lost in nor even directed by the material; rather, the artist becomes who the artist truly is (to riff on Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo*) *through* the material. Only when the personality of the artist is pulled out of its subjectivity and given shape through its encounter with material does it, somewhat paradoxically, become what it truly is. This occurs because of the alterity of the material: only in something physical can the artist rescue an artistic idea from pure abstraction (Pareyson 1988: 27) and convey the personality of the artist into a form that can stand on its own._The material of art instigates this opening in a particularly profound manner, perhaps precisely because of its potential indifference and ability to outlive the artist and audience. The material of art, in its alterity, offers to the artist the opportunity to discover an artistic identity.

4 Re-orienting the Artist

The artist releases the unforeseen and fertile possibilities of the material by resisting the habits that often accompany the mastery of technique, the demands of a tradition, or even the success of an individual style. Pareyson describes the necessarily "aggressive" stance of the creator as one that nonetheless welcomes an open encounter with the material:

> In this way, improvisation lays bare one of the most secret aspects of the beginning of a process of formation by revealing in full view the decisive point in which the material can either impose its will or let itself be dominated.
>
> *(1988: 86)*

The true artist can master the material only by knowing how to work in concert with it, "providing that its tendencies, more than impositions to be suffered, become suggestions to be exploited" (86). Pareyson considers the artist's prior knowledge and mastery of technique – her use of stock phrases, fluency in the tradition, and understanding of audience – a necessary condition for artistic novelty and the production of new forms; but, in order for individual creativity to flourish, the artist must also avoid applying the material in a banal and clichéd manner: the material provides cues (*spunti*)[4] that initiate the work's formation (86) and furnish evocative suggestions for its

development. The process takes the familiar form of a hermeneutic circle of interpretation – an ongoing process through which the understanding of the whole can only be achieved by knowing its constituent parts, and likewise, the knowledge of the parts requires some understanding of the whole. Originally associated with the process of textual exegesis, the hermeneutic circle acquires an ontological significance for philosophers such as Heidegger, Gadamer, and Pareyson, for whom human existence is, by its very nature, an ongoing process of understanding. In the realm of art, this circle often unfolds through the interplay of traditional forms and the novel vision of the artist. Gadamer describes it as "the interplay of the movement of tradition and the movement of the interpreter," which proceeds from a constantly transforming commonality between the two, such that "tradition is not simply a permanent precondition; rather, we produce it ourselves inasmuch as we understand, participate in the evolution of tradition, and hence further determine it ourselves" (Gadamer 1989: 293). Pareyson's philosophy, in particular, accentuates the risk and responsibility inherent in any interpretation. Therefore, the artist, as a participant in a larger tradition of social institutions and artistic forms, responds to her material through the familiar and common expressions that result from dedicated practice and membership within a shared cultural history – identity through belonging to a community and the responsibilities that accompany such membership. But in another sense, there is also real risk in the material – whether it is cultural or physical – as the force of its demands, along with its potential indifference and even outright resistance to the vision of the artist, threaten to extinguish the spark of a novel idea or a revolutionary form.

The formation of the work of art therefore begins only when a physical and resistant material is taken up by the artist: "The formative intention defines itself *as* adoption of the material, and the choice of the material brings itself about *as* the birth of the formative intention" (Pareyson 1988: 44). There is a productive tension between the formative intention of the artist and the material and through an exploration of the material "the artist maintains and cultivates it, allowing the material to stand on its own, granting it that independence that is necessary for an interpretative effort" (47 f.). When the tension between material and artist is not productive, they are "out of phase" (*sfasamento*) and the attempted work is dominated by the artist:

> The material does not become the body and existence of the work, but is only adopted as its medium and instrument, and the intention does not concretize itself, but disperses itself in the unquestionable interior life of the artist from which the work cannot break itself away.
>
> *(48)*

Like two pitches resonating to create a harmony, the work of art is neither a mere synthesis of artistic intention on one side and the appropriate material on the other, nor the sublation or transcendence of those positions into some other and distinct third. The work of art is pure form, which arises when the tension between the personality of the artist and the otherness of the material, in the course of its formation, reveals a possibility now shared by both.

The tension between artist and material is productive when the artist interrogates the material and its resistance gives rise to suggestive cues that engender the first glimpses of the work of art – an internal legislation through which the work presents itself to the artist as an autonomous form:

> The work of art as an exercise of pure formativity is a two-fold process: on the one side the humanity and spirituality of the artist, placing itself under the sign of formativity, specifying its rightful formal vocation, and making itself a way of forming, that is, style; on the other side is the formative intention defining itself in that same act that adopts its material and that in it transforms the resistance into stimuli and suggestions
>
> *(Pareyson 1988: 53)*

This is *one* dynamic process through which the artist and the material give rise to a new form – dynamic in the sense that it resonates as a movement between artist and material, but also dynamic in the sense that the encounter reveals possibilities and potential for further development.

The material presents itself as an opportunity for the artist to master it by *listening* to it and not simply by *imposing* rote technique or personal style on the material. Somewhat paradoxically, the individual personality of the artist emerges in full form only from this type of listening to the other. As Jean-Luc Nancy suggests, the artist listens through "a straining toward or in an approach to the self (one should say, in a pathological manner, a *fit of self*: isn't [sonorous] sense first of all, every time, a *crisis of self*)" (2015: 19). Listening draws the self into question through the alterity of the material and through a sensibility that involves more than mere sense perception.

5 The Otherness of Material

The array of dynamic possibilities available to the artist emerges in and through the artist's encounter with the material, a theme Pareyson further develops in the 1957 essay "La materia dell'arte" (Pareyson 2009). What is the material central to Pareyson's aesthetics of formativity, and why is it so essential to the unique and singular processes that Pareyson reserves for the work of art? When an artist faces a musical instrument that could have been fashioned one way or another, or the varying tones of pigments, or words that could have been otherwise, or the body of a dancer that shows its age, these materials first and foremost express themselves in their sheer presence, as they are, and not as innumerable alternative possibilities. However, once the artist engages the material, either through choice or rejection, collaboration or subjugation, that material transforms from an inert reality to a fertile possibility. This is not, of course, a physical change in the material; rather, it is a transformation in the understanding of the artist that, through an encounter with material, sees it as one possibility within a context that could have supported any number of others and that still could.

Pareyson's philosophical commitments are clearly anti-realist: whether in aesthetics or in other aspects of human activity, humans never simply encounter an object "in-itself" – that is, indifferent to us and the other entities that surround it. An object is only ever an object for us within a world or context, in the sense that it is the object of our contemplation, of our observation, and even of our ignorance, and indifference is always already enmeshed in innumerable relations with other objects and observers. And yet, Pareyson's philosophical prejudices are also strongly anti-idealist: in his writings on aesthetics from the 1950s and 60s, Pareyson consistently resists the notion that the work of art is the expression of the inner life of the artist rendered in material form. This framework – which Pareyson indicates is key to avoiding the false dichotomy of "formalism and contentism" (2009: 169) – is crucial to his understanding of material and its role in improvisation.

Pareyson identifies two meanings of the term "material" in art: the first denotes the physical nature of the completed work as an individual, resistant, and concrete object; the second denotes material as the "substrate" of artistic activity – namely, that on which the work of the artist is performed. The first speaks to the completed work's sheer physicality – the painting, the wall of sound, the movement of dancers – which can never be experienced simply as physical material in itself but only appears as formed; the second idea of material includes a rather long list of items: not only the sensible material or medium of the work – pigment, steel, sound, or language – but also the various techniques that artists employ, the cultural traditions and institutions that support the existence and reception of those works, and the natural and environmental conditions that allow for certain works (2009: 170 f.). These two meanings appear to present a problematic dichotomy: either the work of art is simply material formed one time and in a unique way by the artist, or the work of art is material that has succumbed to the artist's vision and is, thus, merely material (172).

The first position represents an overly materialist or realist understanding of the work of art, culminating in an act of objectification, exteriorization, and materialization that subjects the interior life of the artist to the external material; the second – founded on the idealist notion that material is "merely material" and, thus, can be transformed into something totally new – subjects the exterior material to the interior, spiritual life of the artist (172). In both options, the encounter results in the submission, and even reduction, of one side to the other.

Pareyson, however, does not view this opposition as an irresolvable one. In fact, the resolution of this tension can be attributed to the particular type of encounter that the artist has with the material. In the process of the work's formation, the choice of material does not come before or after the birth of the work. The work's conception by the artist and the encounter with material are coeval, such that the artist's idea is born "fully clothed" (*vestito*), that is, qualified by the material and its latent possibilities (Pareyson 2009: 170). The material sets limits and only through those limits can it then offer particular possibilities to the artist that have not yet occurred:

> History attests that an innovation in the material, such as a new musical instrument or a new technique for painting, can cause a revolution in art […] in which a determinate material presents certain technical possibilities that previously were not present.
>
> *(170)*

The material and its transformative capabilities – whether it is simply an inert object awaiting the artist's touch, or a cultural tradition that awaits a novel interpretation – address the inquisitive and receptive artist as opportunities for interpretation and transformation.

Unlike other human activities (philosophy, science, and moral action), which strive to conform material to their own standards, art seeks its material in a field where, according to Pareyson, there should be no ultimate criteria other than the desire to follow the material where it leads in the production of a pure form. Yet the material itself has no meaning other than those conferred upon it by humans – for this reason, it can be submitted to a purely formative intent: "The adoption of 'physical material' as 'material to be formed' is thus essential and originary in art and conditions the very possibility of its specification" (2009: 173); or, in other words, the artist's investment in the physicality of the material is the only way to engage its potential to be formed. True art is *senza genitivo* (173): it is not the art *of* something either in the sense that it belongs to it or is simply about it (173); rather, it exists in and through the very material the artist selects. For Pareyson, therefore, the two meanings of the term "material" are, in fact, inextricably linked: "art has no other material than physical and sensible material" (173 f.) and yet retains that material is the medium through which the technique and craft, cultural wisdom, and singular insight of the artist are expressed and find themselves. Pareyson's identification of the tension within competing conceptions of material mirrors the discussions about improvisation and its status as a work of art. The inspired genius on one side, submitting material to an inexplicable transformation and, on the other, the technical rigor of artistic craft, the conformity to and development of a particular style, and the expression of a particular cultural form. In the first case, the work of genius that arises from the interior life of the artist is unique, inimitable, and completely new; in the second case, the material – physical or cultural – is pre-existing and inherited, such that technical mastery is knowledge of the pre-given forms and rules. On one side, unfettered creative freedom and, on the other, subordination to the rule of the material.

Pareyson's strategy is not simply to find balance between the two extremes, either in emphasis or in some actual synthesis of the two sides, but, rather, his goal is to uncover the conceptual foundation that both sides share. Using an analogy that challenges the improvisatory continuity of language suggested by Hagberg (2014), Pareyson notes, for example, that the transition from

simple rule-following in the everyday use of language to the poetic expression of an artistic idea through language

> is possible only if one adopts a dynamic concept that functions as an explanatory principle; this is the concept of material, which in its definition (physical material as the substrate of artistic activity) necessarily includes a *relation* and a *process*.
>
> *(2009: 176; my italics: R. V.)*

This dialogue between the artist and the material "allows *interiority* and *independence* to coexist without friction" (2009: 177). Improvisation, here understood as an active process rather than its outcome, occurs because this dialectical movement protects the originality of the artist without devaluing the material as a mere condition or limitation. According to Pareyson, the artist *constitutes* (but does not create) the material of art and *interprets* it in its independent nature:

> The material of art is such only as it is loaded with artistic suggestions and ripe with formative possibilities; but its suggestive character shows itself only through the act through which the artist observes it, welcomes it and adopts it: the material of art is what it is only *within* artistic adoption.
>
> *(2009: 178)*

The work is, thus, in a sense, set free from its *mere* materiality, "born *as* adoption of *that* material" in its particularity so that "the material becomes artistic *as* the delineation of *that* idea" (179). This model challenges the idea of artistic spontaneity wherein the artist brings the idea *to* the material or simply discovers it as a happy accident *in* the material. The unforeseeable aspect of improvisation arises not by chance but through the dialogue established between artist and material – one that relies on the expertise of the artist and the particularity (physical characteristics, history, etc.) of the material to create a productive and reciprocal tension, such that "the material conforms to the realization of an idea through choices of the artist, but these choices are conditioned by the nature of the material" (179). True to its etymology, the spontaneity of the encounter arises in and through the encounter itself, "which is never free and unbounded but tied to a *very specific relation* that emerges in the conception of the work of art" (179; my italics: R. V.), one that is "*together* an act of freedom and of limitation" (179).

For Pareyson, art is the exteriorization of the interior life of the artist into physical material, which not only coincides with the work but *is* the work itself. And only after improvisation – which arises through the encounter with the artist's chosen material – does the artist stand in the presence of her work. The material is never the same material – it is material through the eyes of the artist, who changes and grows. If the work is reducible neither to the material nor to the artist's style, and if the work is not simply a synthesis of the two, then "the physical body of the work" – that is, the only way that works of art present themselves – must be understood "as if it were *everything*. In reality the work *is nothing but* its physical existence" (Pareyson 2009: 168). How is the physical body of a work of art a totality and a relation? The key is Pareyson's notion of the work of art as "formed form" and its relation to time. The physical reality of the work is the site of pure formativity, and "[t]he magic of art consists precisely in the *identification* of spirituality and physicality" (169). This occurs in a new and unique form that stands on its own and reconciles what would otherwise be an incommensurable relation between its two sides. The autonomous form that emerges reveals a foundation rooted in its own contingency – a physical entity or experience that does not have to be, but that, given the personality of the artist and the particularities of the material, is constrained to a range of possibilities, and once brought into form, establishes the criteria for its own success. Through its sheer physicality, the work of art does not transcend

the individuality of the artist and the limitations of the material, but rather reveals its own transcendental structure: the conditions of its very own possibility within the contingencies that present themselves to human judgment during the creative process and through the encounter with material.

6 The Dynamic Time of Improvisation

The time of improvisation in which the artist brings shape and form to the work often eludes clear explanation, as it is frequently understood to be spontaneous and intuitive, and is often defined by what it is not rather than what it is (Berliner 1994: 2). Pareyson asserts that "the most important trait of every kind of improvisation is its extemporaneity" (1988: 85), but this is not simply spontaneity understood as the sudden or unexpected event that occurs "in the moment" or immersed in a "flow" – all of which would rely on a conception of time that is external to the artist and in which one can either be immersed or out of sync with. Extemporaneity here entails the application of a well-practiced routine and is grounded in familiar responses that are more like preparations *for* than reactions *to* the unforeseen. This preparedness, however, reveals a certain paradoxical threat that, as mentioned earlier, "on the one hand, exposes it [improvisation] to the risk of common idiom and the most hackneyed convention, and on the other hand, sharpens its productive capacity and inherent fertility" (85). With an ear to the latent possibilities in the material, the artist's technical mastery, communication with contemporaries, and awareness of tradition place the artist within a nexus of choice – it is not simply when a stray note, or an imperfection in a block of marble, or a forgotten line on stage lead to a chance moment of creative genius; it is more properly the realization, however instantaneous and fleeting, that within those rote forms and routines were once choices selected from a range of opportunities *not* taken, opportunities to do *x* that remain unrealized variations of the encounter between the material and the artist.

Thus, when the familiar and habitual are brought to bear upon the unforeseeable and are presented to the artist through exploration and encounter with the material, an opportunity emerges; rather than a singular, unpredictable moment against which the artist reacts, the artist discovers a manifold of possibilities awaiting development through the artist's mastery and expertise. DiPiero (2018: 3) offers a clear articulation of this structure by capitalizing on the ambiguities inherent in the double meaning of the term "contingent" – what is "not-yet-known" and also what "could-have-been-otherwise" – in order to argue that improvisation "does not reference either the open or the already decided but both at once, and always." Improvisation points simultaneously to a future and to a past or, in the language of Pareyson, marks the formulation of a truth that is both "ulterior" or yet-to-be-formulated, and also "revelatory" or indicative of the conditions that gave rise to any particular formulation (Pareyson 2013: 69–77). The unforeseen aspect of improvisation in this model of extemporaneity is, thus, not simply what lies "down the road" in some undisclosed future, nor is it a matter of the artist being "in the moment" to await some unexpected outcome. Improvisation is outside of time (extemporaneous) in the sense that it reveals what never appears, and could never appear to the artist within the experienced flow of time, namely, the very *conditions* for temporality itself that make it possible for new works to emerge. Rather than fall into the predictable tracks of rote habit or established techniques and forms, the encounter between the artist and material – when it succeeds and a pure form emerges – breaks the routine flow of time and exposes the possibilities that underlie the actuality of every moment. This is not a *sensed or experienced* interruption of time, but one that is available only to understanding.[5]

Improvisation thus signals an event of interpretation – a call to listen that could be answered through the habitual and clichéd but, more properly for the artist, elicits a novel and unique response that in turn contributes to and develops the context out of which it emerges. Garry Hagberg's analysis of improvisation (2014) suggests a certain structural continuity across a wide

range of human activities, locating in Wittgenstein's understanding of linguistic utterances a common basis for improvisation that begins with non-artistic, everyday improvisatory acts (see also Nachmanovitch 1990; Gould and Keaton 2000). Such moments arise in reaction to unforeseen circumstances and unfold with the explicit goal of moving those moments forward, such as when we ride a bike over unpredictable terrain with the goal of maintaining balance, or we continue a difficult conversation with the goal of improving understanding. Pareyson, however, resists this "continuum" model of improvisation, which flattens any real distinction between artistic improvisation and everyday improvised action, and instead suggests that artistic improvisation is of an altogether different kind – one that leverages technical skill and fluency to encourage the interruption of the normal course of events and to generate novel forms. The artistic encounter with material not only requires a certain level of ability but also enables new possibilities to arise *despite* the artist's fluency and familiarity with those existing forms – challenges that arise from the unforeseen confluence of the artist and material.

The tension between these two poles – the individual personality of the artist on one side, and the alterity of the material on the other, neither of which is reducible to the other nor sufficient on its own to produce a work of art – presents a set of incommensurable poles similar to others that Pareyson frequently exploits in his broader philosophy.[6] The pair forms an antinomy (a conceptual pair in which one reality necessarily excludes the other), which Pareyson does not seek to resolve through a synthesis of the two (a la Hegel), but to elucidate through the indication of their shared premise (akin to Kant's solution of the antinomies). Here, the incommensurable relation between artist and material is reconciled through a formal simultaneity, one brought to form through the creation of the work of art. While the confluence of artist and material present the artist with an irreconcilable opportunity – a multitude of possibilities from which there will always be a remainder, or in terms of the work, of which there will never be a definitive and conclusive work of art. These are not infinite possibilities, as they are framed by the individuality of the artist and the particular resistance of the material; the work of art brings form and "structure to the indefinite" (Chiurazzi 2017: 234). Thus, they are a multitude of contingent possibilities within which the artist creates novel forms. Moreover, these possibilities are not experienced, as such, by the artist, but form the necessary condition for the realization of these possibilities into unique yet contingent works of art.

Pareyson's unique contribution to aesthetics allows us to consider improvisation an essential moment in the process of artistic genesis, effectively negating the question of whether improvisation constitutes a "work" in its own right. While improvisational performances can occur in a multitude of ways, they all share an essential feature – the direct engagement with physical material that, in spite of place, context, community, and institutions, provides a unique form of resistance that cannot simply be mastered, but that requires the artist to undertake the risk and responsibility of interpretation without confiding in the supports, tropes, and clichés that accompany the everyday encounters with the unforeseen or unpredictable. Improvisation – the process through which the artist confronts and capitalizes on the unforeseen possibilities latent in the encounter of artist and material – gives birth to a work that transcends the limits of both artist and material. It is neither the full expression of either participant, nor their simple sum. The work is the irrational result of a confluence that can never be fully reconciled and for which there is no common measure: a work that invents its own way of doing and establishes its own criteria for judgment; it is singular but never definitive. In this way, the work of art opens up a world (Heidegger 2002) that is always one among the innumerable possible worlds suggested by the artist's encounter with material. The unforeseen element of improvisation is, therefore, not a matter of time unfolding from moment to moment – as if temporal moments in and of themselves could produce anything – but a matter of the unforeseen possibilities that arise when the inner life of the artist and the alterity of physical material are converted into pure form.

7 Cues for Further Thinking

What does the artist see in the material when a sculpture first emerges from out of its raw material? Or when a combination of notes and sounds – perhaps whimsically generated on the piano or inspired by the chirps of a bird or even the chirps of an electronic device – provides the artist with the first glimpse of the work's form? The same holds when we transfer these initial moments into other settings – such as a frenetic, improvisational jazz performance, or comedians working on stage in a scenario generated by audience prompts, or a street artist happening upon the proper place and time to perform. On such occasions a different modality of time emerges – from the flowing continuum of our everyday experiences to the dynamic extemporaneity of the unforeseen. In order for improvisation to allow the unforeseen to emerge through artistic creation, the artist has to engage possibilities that would otherwise remain hidden. What to the average person would just be a swatch of color, or the hum of an air conditioner, or a set of verbal instructions, for the artist becomes an opportunity, a possibility for transformation, the rescue of the materials of the everyday from their end-driven functionality. What appears to the pedestrian gaze as the given state of affairs reveals, when subjected to the artist's gaze, a foundation in change and in possibility; but, rather than furnish a new explanatory principle (as might the philosopher or the scientist or the moralist), the artist creates a new form that exemplifies how no one world or principle could ever exhaust reality.

Improvisation, then, marks the revelation of possibilities in a creative process that would otherwise remain closed off and silent within the indifference of material or the inscrutability of the artist's unique point of view. It is that moment in the creative process when the vision of the artist and the chosen material transcends the limits of either, such that listening or seeing reflect back on the artist and present an opportunity for new forms to emerge. This is possible because art is contingent and, in the process of its own creation, lays those possibilities bare, revealing the moments in which previous possibilities had become actualities and contingent phenomena took the form of that which could no longer be otherwise. This occurs because each work, as a formed form, establishes the criteria for its own success. Rather than compose *ex nihilo* or on the fly, the improviser brings all knowable possibilities and all knowable materials to bear on a single point and, through his or her facility, enacts their artistry not only through skill and fluency with a medium or tradition, but first and foremost, and necessarily, through the skill of judgment that selects from among that multitude of possibilities.

Pareyson's placement of improvisation at the very origin of the work of art challenges the critique that improvisation is merely an embellishment on an established composition, as well as those theories that reduce the art of improvisation to inexplicable flashes of genius of unknown origin. Of course, it is difficult to reflect on improvisation without paying particular attention to live jazz performances, when the musical form unfolds in spontaneous moments of artistic creativity and freedom, when the artist brings his personality to the material (sound, tradition, the presence of other musicians), and when the material responds with unforeseen and unexpected opportunities for artistic formation.[7] But the images conjured by Pareyson's theoretical description of the creative process, in spite of their conceptual heft and occasional references to music, conjure images of artistic creation that are less likely to occur within smoky and dimly lit mid-century jazz clubs and more likely to unfold in quiet spaces reserved for a more traditional, and perhaps even romanticized, notion of the creative genius who toils away in isolation or in an artist's studio. Nonetheless, the studious composer faithfully waiting for inspiration to strike in the midst of routine and solitude, or the frenetic dancer responding to light and sound, or the photographer chancing upon an unexpected vista, or the freestyling rapper playing off of his adversary and the energy of the crowd – all participate in the same activity. All artists improvise. All art, at its origin, is improvisation.

Notes

1 See, for example, George Lewis' important study on the distinctions between "Afrological" and "Eurological" perspectives in improvised music (Lewis 2004).
2 All quotations from Pareyson (1988; 2009) are my own translation.
3 The ontological relationship between truth and interpretation in all human endeavors is a constant in Pareyson's work. See, in particular, Pareyson 2013: 47–78.
4 Pareyson places great weight upon the term "cue" (*spunto*), which can mean a starting point; the cue an actor receives if he has forgotten his lines; the opening note to a piece of music; a spur; or a suggestion. The verb form of the word (*spuntare*), used intransitively, means to rise or to sprout, or even to appear. As such, the *spunto*, or *suggestive moment*, has to be understood simultaneously from a number of perspectives: from that of the artist, the starting point for formation initiated by the artist; from the perspective of the material, its ability to prompt and offer suggestions to the artist in the process of formation; and generally, the appearance of the work of art as forming.
5 The most thorough articulation of time as a dynamic, transcendental structure can be found in Chiurazzi 2017. Pareyson's own hermeneutic theory, set forth in *Truth and Interpretation*, explains this structure as belonging to the basic interpretative structure of all understanding, in which the actual truths we encounter in the world are premised upon an inexhaustible surplus or *ulteriorità* of possible truths yet to be formulated (Pareyson 2013: 75 ff.). Heidegger's famous "broken hammer" analogy from *Being and Time* is another articulation of this type of "formal indication" that points to the condition of possibility for understanding (Heidegger 1967: 97 ff.).
6 On Pareyson's use of dialectical pairs, especially in relation to works of art, see Valgenti 2018: 109 f.
7 Bertinetto (2010: 162) recounts Pareyson's fondness for jazz recordings in the years after World War II.

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5

ONTOLOGY OF IMPROVISATION AND JAZZ

Daniel Martin Feige

Jazz has always posed particular challenges to the aesthetics of music because many supposedly secure, basic concepts of musical aesthetics are called into question by its practice. This is particularly true for the concept of the musical work. If one understands "work" simply to mean the product of artistic work, there is, of course, no problem with Cecil Taylor's expressive solo improvisations on the piano or Ornette Coleman's group improvisations. The term "musical work," however, usually means something else; it refers to an object with a controversial ontology,[1] an object that, supposedly, has been brought into the world by composers and that can be embodied by various interpretations, i.e., concrete spatiotemporal musical events. The situation is further complicated by the fact that musical works are usually associated with the existence of scores or other types of instructions for musical interpretation that define that work's constitutive properties, and that the artistic success of a musical interpretation, nevertheless does not simply consist of fulfilling the parameters set by a score. Indeed, the question of fulfilling the specified parameters is, first of all, a question of whether an interpretation is in fact a *correct* interpretation of a specific musical work, but not a question of whether the interpretation is an aesthetically successful interpretation or one that does justice to the spirit of the work.

Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman may have produced works in the sense of the results of their artistic work and, more precisely, as singular spatiotemporal events that have been recorded (for the role of recording in jazz cf. Hamilton 2003; Brown 2000b). But they have not produced musical works in the above sense, which are then embodied in various musical interpretations. The question of whether or not Taylor's solo improvisations or Coleman's group improvisations can be repeated and whether or not the result is then acoustically almost identical to the recorded improvisation is of secondary importance to the question of what Taylor and Coleman have produced here. This fact becomes apparent in the light of the discussion around the album *Blue* by Mostly Other People Do the Killing (cf. Magnus 2016). It consists of the attempt to create an acoustic re-enactment of Miles Davis's classic record "Kind of Blue." Not only is it obvious, however, that they have produced ontologically quite a different object than the original recording, it is also clear that Mostly Other People Do the Killing here ultimately produced something more like a work of "concept art" or a musical recording that explicitly deals with the question of the possibilities or impossibilities of repeating a singular jazz improvisation. You cannot listen to *Blue* like you would *to* a conventional jazz album without missing its point.

Accordingly, it seems at first sight plausible that Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman, but also Miles Davis, did not produce something that exists in the same way as the works of Beethoven, Mahler, and Schönberg do. However, the question whether Jazz improvisation is based on works

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is particularly difficult to answer with regard to Miles Davis's "Kind of Blue": the pieces on this record are so-called "jazz standards" and, thus, are part of a canon of jazz in the sense of pieces played by many jazz musicians. The fact that this canon is in motion and constantly sees new entries while others tend to fade away does not contradict its status as a canon in any way; for example, the opening track "So What" only became a corresponding standard through "Kind of Blue." In short: Aren't standards ultimately something quite like musical works as we know them from the tradition of European art music?

With the following reflections, I will make what may seem like an unusual maneuver: I will neither argue that they are musical works, nor will I argue that they are not. Rather, I will take the practice of playing jazz standards to mean that it makes explicit a fundamental aspect of the practice of playing works in classical music (also cf. Feige 2014, especially Chapter 3). In doing so, I am not committing myself to the – in my opinion – problematic thesis that all interpretations of works also have improvisational features (for this line of argumentation cf. Gould and Keaton 2000). My guiding thought rather goes as follows: We can learn something about what it means for an interpretation of a work to succeed if we take a look at what it means to produce an aesthetically rewarding rendition of a jazz standard. In both cases being an aesthetically successful performance is about making sense of a tradition in terms of redefining the meaning of a work or the meaning of a jazz standard in the course of the musical performance. Depending on how it is read, this thesis can be interpreted as a farewell to music-ontological debates in the spirit of the performative dimension of music, or as a reformulation of basic music-ontological concepts in the spirit of a concept of aesthetic success; I tend to understand the meaning of what follows in the second and not the first sense.

My reflections suggest a change of view with regard to most contributions to the ontology of jazz music: We should not so much ask whether the practice of playing jazz standards corresponds to the practice of interpreting musical works in classical music, but we should rather understand the practice of interpreting musical works in classical music in the spirit of an analysis of what it means to play a jazz standard aesthetically in a successful manner. To develop this claim, I will proceed in two steps. In the first (1), I will show that both alternatives of either denying jazz standards the status of musical works or understanding them as conventional works are not very promising. The problem here is that the alternative represented in contemporary discussions is simply a false one. In the second step (2), I will attempt to propose an alternative to this alternative. This is based on the idea that jazz standards are what has been made of them in the course of a musical performance against the background of a history of playing the corresponding standard. In contrast to the prevailing projective concepts of playing works (i.e., their temporal logic is oriented to the future insofar as they can be prepared beforehand), I would like to defend a retroactive concept of musical works in the light of the practice of playing jazz standards (i.e., the meaning of an aspect of the music is renegotiated in every moment of the musical performance). I don't mean for this to erode the difference between the practice of playing jazz standards and the practice of interpreting musical works. Rather, my thesis is that a look at the practice of playing a jazz standard can shed light on a central aesthetic dimension of what it means to interpret a musical work. The first part, in short, has a rather critical character, while the second part, on the other hand, tries to develop some positive characterizations regarding the question of what jazz standards are – and what musical works are.

1 Works or All Play? On False Alternatives

The default position seems to be to treat jazz standards as a special kind of musical works, more precisely as ontologically "thin" works (cf. Davis 2001 and for a defense of the work-character of jazz standards Young and Matheson 2000). There is one particular fact that seems to speak in favor

of this position: Different jazz musicians can play the same standard. We immediately understand the idea that the well-known standard "Autumn Leaves" has been played by Bill Evans as well as by Chick Corea and Jacky Terrasson. And at first glance, the justification for this idea seems to be that there has to be something work-like that is the basis for the improvisations of the three mentioned musicians.

Let's assume that the basis is a musical notation, a so-called "lead sheet"; they are found, for example, in Real Books, i.e., compendiums of jazz standards that almost all jazz musicians know. It is easy to understand such lead sheets as thinned-out musical scores and, as such, scores that contain less information than scores in classical music, so that they can give the interpreters more freedom. Even if in classical music's conventional scores not all parameters of the work – such as speed and phrasing – are clearly indicated,[2] it is nevertheless the case that the tone-pitch relationship and the number of voices, etc. are sacrosanct. Whoever plays something else with regard to these parameters has either made a mistake or has stopped playing the work, insofar as he or she is no longer complying with the conditions that the musical score demands. Jazz standards seem to be correspondingly "thin" works compared to scores and, thus, only slightly different from them. While most scores of classical music define many characteristics for musical interpretation, most "scores" of jazz standards define few characteristics for the musical interpretation.

The claim that jazz standards are "thin" works and, thus, only slightly distinguished from works in the tradition of classical music is right away confronted with a simple objection: If you have a lead sheet in front of you and try to treat it like a score, you will fail (also cf. Hagberg 2000). This can be seen from the fact that musicians who are only classically trained are often surprised by how jazz musicians can achieve such impressive sonic results from the few, and still rather cryptic, details found in the lead sheets. Usually, the lead sheet contains a few hints about the harmonic progression of the corresponding standard, and there are several different nomenclatures for this: a C minor chord based on the Dorian scale with minor third and minor seventh as essential chord notes can be written as "Cm7" as well as "C-7." On the other hand, the melody of the corresponding standard is almost always notated. In addition, a style indication can often be read above the score – for example "Ballad," "Medium Swing," and "Bossa" – as well as sometimes explicit tempo indications and, more rarely, a riff characteristic of the standard on an instrument – for example the piano riff of Herbie Hancock's "Cantaloupe Island" or "Watermelon Man" – or a certain rhythmic pattern – for example in Hancock's "Maiden Voyage." In any case, you can't simply read a jazz standard if you are solely a classically trained musician.

However, this argument is, of course, of limited significance. A score from classical music also cannot be read without the acquisition of specific skills. Just as classically trained musicians have learned to read corresponding scores, jazz musicians have learned to read corresponding lead sheets. Even if it is true that the latter contains much less information than the former, this does not mean that they are no longer scores that define the properties that are constitutive for a musical work. Another argument, therefore, seems to be necessary to refute the claim that lead sheets are scores and standards are musical works. And there is such an argument that states: The fact that one does not take into account in one's improvisation some, a lot or even nearly all the information in the lead sheet about harmony, melody, style, and rhythm does not mean that one has made a mistake or stopped playing the standard in question. If you play the standard "Like Someone in Love" in a key other than C major, in a tempo other than "medium," if you base it on a funk groove instead of a swing feeling, and even if you reharmonize its harmonic structure in favor of certain progressions or harmonic colors and also play the melody in a completely different phrasing, with additions, omissions, in a completely different rhythm, etc., you did not stop playing the standard in question simply on the basis of that. In short: In the course of an improvisation, everything that would seem to be a constitutive manifest property has no definitive authority for the performance – be it through previous agreements between the musicians or through the way

the course of the improvisation takes. To do justice to a standard like "Like Someone in Love" by Jimmy Van Heusen and Johnny Burke does not mean understanding the lead sheet as an authoritative musical text in the sense of a musical score, but to make something aesthetically powerful out of it and, importantly, to do so against the background of a tradition of playing this (and other) standards. Accordingly, Dexter Gordon's improvisation on this standard is no more authentic or closer to the work than Django Bates's improvisation, which, according to a classical understanding of the work, should be described in such a way that it leaves no stone unturned and completely deconstructs the work in question.

Before I start discussing the obvious alternative to the standards-as-works idea – i.e., that standards are not musical works – I would like to point out another fact that seems to me of utmost importance when thinking about playing jazz standards. Even in cases where songs from Broadway shows have been transformed into jazz standards, what we read in our Real Books often contains notations that differ significantly in terms of harmony, melody, and rhythm from the corresponding musical texts that have been written for the shows. This is simply because most notations of jazz standards are, in fact, transcriptions of historically particularly influential recordings of those standards. The fact that the information in different Real Books often differs is not necessarily a technical error but, rather, also ought to be contextualized in the fact that sometimes they often refer to different authoritative recordings. Even such standards that have been played for a long time and have remained in the canon are not, strictly speaking, musical works, and if one were to try to treat them as works, one would have to think of different versions of the work, whereas every work, paradoxically, would be identical to an authoritative recorded version. It is, therefore, no wonder that notations such as those in Real Books are of only limited relevance in the practice of advanced jazz playing; most advanced jazz musicians have memorized the corresponding standards. What they have memorized and/or embodied are not the lead sheets but rather paradigmatic improvisations of the standards they know from close listening (and often transcribing and copying the heard improvisation as a device of learning to improvise). The whole picture of jazz musicians dealing most of the time with scores is a somewhat misleading view of jazz practice.

One more remark about the claim I have just developed. I think that I have shown that it is not only the free jazz improvisations of a Peter Brötzmann or Ornette Coleman that have little to do with conventional musical works, but that this also applies to the practice of playing jazz standards. To put it clearly: I am not denying, of course, that there are also musical works in the conventional sense in jazz. There is a lot of music, especially in the younger, notated big band music of Maria Schneider or Bob Mintzer or, for example, combinations of the jazz traditions with symphonic music like Sebastian Sternal's "Symphonic Societies," that is somehow governed by the concept of the musical work. Here we should definitely be talking about compositions of musical works and also about the fact that there is such a thing as scores here, which determine constitutive characteristics for interpretations. But of course, it is not the case that even when it comes to big band music, in many cases, the aim of the compositional activity is something other than producing a work that transcends the peculiar conditions of playing and recording. More than that, Andrew Kania (Kania 2011) has pointed out that Duke Ellington had no scruples whatsoever about rewriting his sometimes quite symphonic-sounding music after each performance also because he sometimes wrote the music to suit individual musicians and their characteristic way of playing. Even if one cannot generalize this for all big band music, it is still true that even in jazz music, where scores play a big role, it is not usually or always the case that what is essential for the musical performance is encoded in the way it is, for example, in Beethoven's Piano Sonatas. For Ellington's music, an important question for reworking the score seems to be rather whether it produces an energetic and aesthetically rewarding performance.

Should we draw the conclusion from all this that there are no works in jazz? Andrew Kania proposes just that. According to him, jazz is a musical practice in which the work does not play

a role; rather, it is an art form that consists solely of a multitude of performances. Although I obviously sympathize with this position compared to the relevant alternatives in the discussion, it seems to me that it cannot do sufficient justice to the idea that different performances are connected insofar as they are improvisations of the standard. This is ultimately due to the fact that Kania wrongly rejects the idea that the event itself could be the work, pointing out that we actually use the term "work" in a different way, namely in the sense of "enduring entities, or […] objects" (Kania 2011: 287). My objection is not only that this is no less a stipulative way of talking than saying that, in the case of jazz or performance art, the work is simply identical with a specific spatiotemporal event. Rather, it is a dialectical objection; it is no wonder that one arrives at this position, as Kania does, if one presupposes such a concept of work. The reason why Kania cannot do justice to those practices of jazz that consist of playing standards lies in the fact that he isn't able to explicate the relation between different musical improvisations as improvisations of the same jazz standard. To differentiate between something that is permanent and can be embodied in different interpretations (cf. Margolis 1959 as a canonical approach) and something that is a mere singular event seems to be the wrong kind of distinction (cf. Bertinetto 2012).

An obvious reaction to this dialectical objection is that we could try to strengthen the role of the concept of the work against Kania's rejection. Julian Dodd has done this in his critical response to Andrew Kania's proposal (Dodd 2014). One of the central conclusions he draws in the discussion and criticism of Kania's proposal goes like this:

> Standard Form Jazz, by contrast with classical music, is a tradition in which performances, and not the works performed, are our main foci of critical attention. On this view, the relevant difference between the two traditions is not ontological, but evaluative.
>
> *(Dodd 2014: 287)*

Now, it is undoubtedly true that one can focus one's evaluative attention on anything in a musical performance – right down to the peculiarities of the location where a jazz performance takes place. However, Dodd can only maintain the distinction between ontological reconstruction and evaluative perspective by means of a strange division of the musical object itself. Jazz performances simply do not exist as something that can be reconstructed, like abstract objects, since the question of what a musical work is cannot be separated from the question of whether something is a full-fledged embodiment of a musical work.[3]

A descriptive analysis in the way of Dodd's analysis might has the advantage of integrating jazz standards into a given (and, with regard to areas other than aesthetics, quite controversial) account of metaphysics but loses sight of precisely the peculiarities of the objects in question. Julian Dodd's reflections – unlike Andrew Kania's – clearly miss the point of the practice of jazz. That this self-understanding would probably be of no interest to him does not prove that the practice misunderstands itself, but rather that there is something problematic about the way of looking at ontology in this vein. The fact that everything can be described in every possible way and that jazz standards can still be declared to be abstract entities shows less that they are just that, and more that one is overlooking aspects of the aesthetic practice in question, or even that one does not care at all that there is such a practice (cf. Bertinetto 2019).

Despite this criticism, I agree with the stance Julian Dodd takes against Andrew Kania's opinion that jazz standards and musical works should be brought closer together. I believe that we should not draw the distinction between jazz standards and musical works as strictly as Andrew Kania does. Nevertheless, I am sure that Kania's reflections demonstrate a better understanding of the practice of jazz than Julian Dodd's do. The problem with Dodd's as well as Kania's approach is their presupposed understanding of what a musical work is. It is the case that the defense of the "work" character of jazz standards, in the sense of what has been understood by "musical works"

in recent debates in the Anglo-American analytical philosophy of music, is somehow unsatisfactory. Equally unsatisfactory is the alternative of abandoning the work character of jazz standards in favor of the singular musical event because the connection between different improvisations of a jazz standard risks being lost. I am aware that I have not argued exhaustively for either of these diagnoses. But I hope I have shown that in some way something is going wrong with the established distinction or non-distinction between musical works and jazz standards. What is the alternative, then? In my opinion, it consists of *rethinking the concept of a musical work in the light of the practice of playing jazz standards* – precisely because this is a practice that has a certain proximity to the musical interpretation of works and yet is obviously clearly different from it. This – to say it once more – does not mean abolishing the distinction between the musical interpretation of a musical work and the musical improvisation of a jazz standard. It just aims to acknowledge the performative dimension of improvisation and interpretation as well as the fact that there are no rules in aesthetic production that secure the success beforehand of what has been done.

I will develop this thought in three steps: Starting with a little phenomenology of the jazz improvisation, I will first (i) argue that a jazz standard is nothing other than what has been made of it in and through the course of the single improvisation. In a second step (ii), I will then argue that it does not follow from this thesis that different improvisations on a jazz standard have nothing to do with each other. In the third and final step (iii), I will argue that there is a lesson to be learned from this understanding of what a jazz standard is for our own comprehension of what a musical work is.

2 Rethinking the Relation of Work and Improvisation

The first idea (i) can be explicated by saying that jazz improvisations have an autopoietic logic, both of what it means to develop the course of an improvisation and what it means for an improvisation to be successful. We can see this if we elaborate a little on the aesthetic temporality of jazz improvisation; what follows is a minimal phenomenology of jazz improvisation. One characteristic of improvisations is that it is not true that the first move determines what the subsequent moves can be. Rather, the moves later on determine what the aesthetic meaning of the former moves were. Depending on what I continue to play after the initial move of the improvisation, what I improvised before also takes on a different shape. A move in the context of an improvisation is nothing that would open up a space of possibility for following moves. Whether it is an empty or arbitrary move or even if it is an aesthetic mistake depends not on properties (musical or otherwise) that can be described without looking into the further course of the improvisation (cf. Bertinetto 2016).

Whether, after a certain melodic phrase, I repeat it, move it to another key, modify its rhythm, or subsequently start to rethink the phrase more in its harmonic properties than its melodic aspects (e.g., I start to work with the option of the underlying chord) makes a difference for what the meaning of the phrase itself was. Bill Evans has said that jazz is not a prospective art (Gioia 1987: 593); it does not use a blueprint to structure the musical event in advance (also cf. Brown 2000a: Part II). To phrase it as a claim: *The logic of the aesthetic temporality of jazz music is not prospective but, rather, is retroactive*. This means that the aesthetic meaning of an element of an improvisation is worked out in and through the course of the improvisation. Even if fragments of something played earlier or by other players appear in improvisations, and even in the counterfactual case that an improvisation is composed solely of fragments that are all found in the improviser's earlier playing (licks, etc.), it is not the case that the aesthetic meaning of those elements and thus the aesthetic unity of the whole improvisation were already determined before the improvisation took place. Rather, unity and aesthetic meaning are at stake at every moment during an improvisation. Whether the elements of an improvisation go together within a specific unity of this

improvisation is not determined before the improvisation takes place, nor is the aesthetic meaning of the elements of the improvisation, thus, determined beforehand. The concept of aesthetic unity is not to be confused here with stale concepts such as harmony or the like; rather, it means something like immanent coherence, which can, of course, include sounding fragmented, etc.[4] Even the improvisations of the late Coltrane on the recently released posthumous album *Both Directions at Once*, whose musical movements are hardly suspected to exemplify harmony in a manifest sense, show a corresponding aesthetic unity; everything is at the right place without us being able to identify rules of this success that would be universally applicable.[5] The concept of retroactive temporality articulates the idea that an improvisation is not simply a composition of previously available material (i.e., the mere recombination or addition of previously given elements) and that is not taking a previously determined path (i.e., a teleological definition of the improvisation in advance, so to speak); rather, improvisations have an autonomous form insofar as the following statement is true (for further elaboration on this idea cf. Feige 2014: chapter 3): *The aesthetic success of a jazz improvisation is something that has to be developed in and through every improvisation out of itself* (in and through the course of the improvisation and the establishing of its elements).

If it is the case that every successful jazz improvisation establishes its elements in a retroactive way, there obviously can be no criteria that would allow knowing in advance (a priori) what it would take for this peculiar improvisation to succeed. In other words, there is something decidedly ridiculous about measuring what constitutes success for an improvisation by John Coltrane by what constitutes success for an improvisation by Charlie Parker. Even if we take into account the important role of personal styles in jazz, this holds true for different improvisations by the same musician. You have to measure an improvisation by what it tries to develop in and through its course; following an improvisation also means getting a grip on what it might mean for it to fail or succeed by its own standards. The standards of the success of an improvisation are, thus, negotiated in and through the course of the improvisation; they themselves have a specific temporality.

I have to clear up a likely misunderstanding in what I have just developed: There is nothing in what I have claimed that denies that every jazz improvisation has important preconditions. But from what I laid out above, it follows that those preconditions are reworked in and through the improvisation itself. This also explains my criticism of the idea that improvisations are composed of given elements. Even if one can identify phrases in a musician's playing that are also used by other musicians, not only is it true that every advanced musician plays them in his or her own way, but it is also true that the meaning of such a phrase is not something that is attached to it, but one that has to be understood from its relation to other phrases within the singular musical improvisation.

The concept of retroaction, which may be rather exotic in the context of the debates of the analytical philosophy of music, is, as I would briefly like to note, by no means as exotic as it may sound at first. It ultimately comes from current debates on Hegel's philosophy, and here it refers to the logical structure of the development of the spirit[6] that for Hegel has to be understood as the development of freedom in historical-cultural forms of life. I will avoid here an excursion into the more technical considerations of Hegel's "Science of Logic" and would like, instead, to briefly exemplify the retroactive logic I hold to be constitutive for jazz improvisation with a simple example: The course of history in terms of the meaning of historical events (without necessarily implying that history itself is somehow improvised). Historically, earlier events gain a different meaning in the light of events that occur later. What is not at issue here is whether these events actually happened or not – for even if epistemically unfavorable conditions (i.e., that certain sources are no longer accessible or have been destroyed for political reasons) sometimes prevent us from seeing what was the case, we should end up with an anti-realist (or, ultimately, fake-news) account of history. What is at stake, however, is the meaning of these events. To take two examples used by Arthur C. Danto (Danto 1965: chapter 8): It is obvious that Aristarchus could only

have anticipated the theory that Copernicus formulated almost 1600 years later if the latter had actually formulated it – just as the statement that the author of the *Principia Mathematica* was born in Woolethorpe can only be true *after* Newton had written, or at least started writing, the *Principia Mathematica*. Thus, there is nothing mysterious about the idea that the meaning of something is changed or worked out retrospectively and not prospectively. The idea of a retroactive temporality is not the idea that later events change with respect to what has actually been happening or been done formerly. Rather, it is the idea that the later events clarify, work out, bring up, etc. dimensions of the meaning of earlier events. A retroactive temporality does not have to be accompanied by an anti-realist position, but is, rather, solely committed to a process-logical reconstruction of historical, biographical and aesthetic objects (cf. Feige 2015).

Now I turn to the second step (ii), namely the idea that different improvisations of a jazz standard exemplify a stronger connection than just being an unrelated set of individual performances. I have to develop this idea because the propositions that I have crafted up to this point are still confronted with the problem that I have already pointed out with Andrew Kania's proposal: The connection between different improvisations of jazz standards remains unclear. I have rejected Julian Dodd's solution, which ultimately consists of defending a certain metaphysical position by simply decoupling its questions from questions of aesthetics and without taking a careful enough look at what is actually happening in the musical practice of playing jazz. But what could a different solution to the question of the unity and identity of the jazz standard look like, compared to the proposals of Kania and Dodd?

I would like to begin a sketch of an alternative by noting that the meaning of a jazz improvisation is itself not conclusively determined once the improvisation comes to an end. I would, thus, like to propose the idea that not only are the elements of a single improvisation governed by a retroactive temporality, but that the relation between different improvisations is also governed by such a temporality. Just as Wayne Shorter's later improvisations redefine the meaning of his earlier ones, Michael Brecker's improvisations redefine the meaning of John Coltrane's improvisations. This is not meant to be an evaluative judgment, but a judgment about the genesis and the processual character of the meaning of jazz improvisations. Not only is it true that each move within the framework of an improvisation depends on future moves, but it is also true that the meaning of the improvisation as a whole is at stake in light of the later musical development.

How can this idea be explained with regard to the question of the unity and identity of a jazz standard? It can be done as follows: Improvising on a jazz standard does not mean improvising on a previous set of rules that would provide criterial conditions for the question of what it actually means to play this standard. Rather, it means that one's playing always relates to how previous performers played this standard in the past. In other words: Even in the case where there is no close relationship between the way of playing a jazz standard (like there is, for example, in Richie Beirach's recording of "On Green Dolphin Street" and Dave Liebman's recording of the same standard, because they both played together extensively for years), playing a jazz standard always means moving into a tradition of playing that standard.[7] From this perspective it becomes clear why a lot of lead sheets of jazz standards are related to singular improvisations: Andrew Kania is right when he claims that jazz exists, above all, in and through the practice of a living musical practice that is mainly constituted by individual improvisations at the center of aesthetic appreciation. But this thesis does not contradict the idea that there is a connection between different improvisations of a jazz standard that is stronger than (as Stephen Davies once misleadingly put it; Davies 2001: 16) the standard just being an unimportant ingredient in the process of improvisation. In short: *If every jazz improvisation establishes the criteria of its own success in and through the performance, this always happens against the background of former processes of establishing such criteria*.

Playing a standard does not mean simply doing anything with a dispensable harmonic-melodic basis, nor does it mean understanding it – in the sense of a classical musical work – as a definition

of the constitutive characteristics of a performance. Rather, playing a standard means entering into a tradition of playing that standard. It is like the development of what it means to have a personal style and one's own voice in jazz – developing your own way of improvising happens in and through relating to other people having done that and through picking up aspects of their playing (e.g., by transcribing solos from records or playing with other musicians). What precedes the playing of a standard is, thus, not a score or an otherwise codified definition of the constitutive characteristics that a performance has to fulfill in order to be considered a performance of that standard; nor does playing a standard mean just doing anything. The common ground of the different improvisations is, thus, not something that is decided upon before playing, but something that is constantly being produced new and anew in and through playing.

The obvious objection to the hermeneutical model of a mediation of practice in and through tradition is the case of standards that do not have previous occasions of having been played. My answer to this objection should be obvious: A piece cannot be a jazz standard before it has been treated like that in a collective musical practice, and, thus, it isn't a standard before it has been played by many musicians. Thus, I believe that the classification of something as a jazz standard is, basically, not that different from the cases I have just described. If, with the album *Kind of Blue*, Miles Davis's "So What" achieved the status of a jazz standard, it could not have become that without other musicians referring to the recording and thus establishing a tradition in which "So What" became something played in the course of musical practice. Even when a new jazz standard is introduced, the later recourse to it is what makes it a standard in the first place. A consequence of this is that the status of something as a jazz standard is neither a fixed property nor is it something that cannot be lost later (then we could say that it *was* a jazz standard during a specific time but isn't anymore).

I finally turn to the third step (iii), I wanted to develop: the proposition that the corresponding retroactive logic does not only apply to musical performances that are improvisations of a jazz standard, but also to musical interpretations of musical works. I would like to point out once more that I do not want to claim that every musical interpretation of a musical work is improvised; playing a piano sonata by Beethoven requires a wide range of musical skills, but what the pianist does here is certainly not an improvisation in the sense of what Parker or Coltrane have done. Rather, what I want to propose is the idea that there is a relationship between musical improvisations of a jazz standard and musical interpretations of musical works in terms of what it means to play them aesthetically well. To be more precise, my proposition is the following: *Just as the elements of an improvisation and improvisations as a whole are retroactively renegotiated in their meaning, so too are interpretations of a work retroactively renegotiated in their meaning.* This is not only because playing a work is never merely a vertical relationship between the interpreter and the musical text, but also because playing a work always means being socialized into a musical practice that essentially consists of traditions of playing works (even if you are socialized in a practice that tries to cut you off from former interpretations of a work, you are nevertheless being socialized in such a practice; it may be explicit or implicit, but the interpretation of a work always happens against the background of a collective social practice). Rather, it is also and, above all, because every musical interpretation must work out the meaning of the musical work anew. This does not mean that interpreters can simply do anything when they interpret a work, assuming that it is somehow new and different. Rather, it means that interpretations are not already implied or encoded in the work itself. Successful interpretations work out the meaning of a musical work anew and, thereby, always work it out in a different way. Criticizing an interpretation in the name of the work may be a useful device in aesthetic criticism against overinterpretations. But (and this is the decisive point) what it means to do justice to the work aesthetically is not already clear or secured logically before the interpretation takes place. The history of interpretations of a work would be quite pointless if one did not assume that there is some kind of development here that is

aesthetically relevant; a Mahler symphony sounds different today than it did fifty years ago, and not merely in an empirical sense.

What does it mean that every successful interpretation makes a work be heard anew? It does not only mean that interpretations (whether the performer likes it or not, whether they know it or not) always relate to previous interpretations; "new" is a relational predicate. Above all, it means that a distinction that seems obvious in circles of musical laymen has to be examined differently than how it is generally understood. The idea in question is the distinction between characteristics that are definitely defined by a score (such as pitch relation) and those characteristics that are not so clearly defined by the score (such as phrasing and tempo; "adagio" doesn't mean a specific beats-per-minute tempo). This is a second aspect I want to point out, one that is even more central than the first aspect just discussed. A problematic explanation of this distinction would be that interpreting a work would mean, on the one hand, fulfilling the conditions indicated by the score, but on the other, shaping the aspects left open by the work in a way that is both original and perhaps also somehow interesting. I do not want to deny that a score indicates, at least in the sense of a negative condition, what one must not do – for example, playing a note differently from what is written down. But what is problematic about the just given interpretation of the distinction is that it suggests that what happens within the framework of a musical interpretation can be aesthetically divided in this way, in fulfilling the definitive conditions and then filling in the other, not-so-clearly defined conditions. Even if one were to understand this distinction as a mere analytical one and thus a distinction that we can conceptually draw but cannot hear in the performance, it would not be saved by this, since one is, thereby, referring to this musical interpretation in a distorted manner. In the context of a musical interpretation of a musical work, it is not the case that some elements of a work are predetermined in their meaning, while others are left to the taste of the performers: In the light of the tempo and micro-timing of a performance, the harmonic transitions also acquire a certain meaning, and in the light of phrasing, the melody appears in a new light. *Even the non-negotiable conditions of the work are, thus, not merely "given" elements of the work in the sense that their meaning would already be established before the interpretation.*

I hope these last remarks can shed light on my thesis that the temporal logic of improvisation makes explicit an aspect of the temporality of musical interpretations of musical works (even if there are straightforward differences – i.e., the way they are prepared and can be prepared before the performance): Each successful interpretation works out the meaning of the work in a new way in contrast to earlier interpretations. But unlike in the case of improvisations, in which the respective musical spatiotemporal event is already the whole truth, so to speak, the aesthetic sense of works is not identical with the individual interpretations. Nevertheless, works are not independent of their interpretations: they are articulated by them, and their aesthetic relevance is worked out in and through the interpretations. It is the very work that shows itself in and through its interpretations. Quite analogously to the basic insight of recent debates in the philosophy of action – that the meaning of something has to be understood with regard to the ways of its embodiment – the aesthetic meaning of a work is worked out through its interpretations. In light of the variations between different interpretations, the work, thereby, also shows a constitutive indeterminacy. Musical interpretations, thus, renegotiate the meaning of musical works, which means that musical interpretations renegotiate the works themselves. The work would then be a horizontal series of interpretations and constitutively unfinished insofar as the series can never be definitively closed. Hence, we may venture to assume, works could be conceived of as processes in the sense that they are neither self-sufficient entities that remain in a negatively explained afterlife, nor objects located in a realm of ideal objects, and certainly not quantities of musical performances in a nominalist sense. And further, it is possible that we can learn something about the existence and the aesthetic significance of works if we take a look at the practice of jazz improvisations of jazz standards.[8]

Notes

1 Picking up a phrase used by Alan Tormey, Lydia Goehr speaks of musical works as "ontological mutants." Cf. Goehr 1992: 2.
2 With the notion of conventional scores, I exclude the case of scores that have been produced before the rise of the paradigm of the musical work in Beethoven's times, and I also exclude practices of notation, such as graphical notation, that were developed in the 20th century.
3 Arguments for this can be developed with recent discussions in the field of neo-Aristotelic positions, which surprisingly have received little attention in Anglo-American aesthetics. They provide resources to explain the logical grammar of terms in such a way that objects do not only fall under a certain concept but can embody a concept in a full-fledged or in a privative way. Thus concepts are understood as norms. Cf. for example Foot 2001.
4 Cf. Adorno 2004, mainly part 8.
5 These ideas are influenced by Kant's idea of aesthetic rules. Cf. Kant 1987: § 48.
6 The fact that a historically later way of life overcomes the contradictions of the earlier way of life does not mean that the historically later way of life was already implicated as an aim in the historically earlier one, for this development can always only be told in retrospect. Cf. Hegel 1977: 263 ff. Cf. also the introduction of Hegel 1991.
7 I pick up motives of Gadamerian Hermeneutics here. Cf. Gadamer 1975. Bruce Benson applied Gadamerian Hermeneutics for questions of the philosophy of music. Cf. Benson 2003. Also cf. Cook 2013: chapter 5.
8 For helpful comments on an earlier version of this text I thank Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta.

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6

IMPROVISATION AND ORIENTATION

Marcello Ruta

The aim of this chapter is twofold. I intend, on the one hand, to outline a hermeneutical approach to the study and analysis of improvisational practices, particularly in relation to artistic domains; in brief, this approach consists in the use of the notion of *orientation*, including some related sub-notions, as a hermeneutical tool for analyzing improvised artistic performances. On the other hand, I offer a first application of this approach to the musical notion of *free improvisation*, although this application can plausibly be extended to other performing arts as well (e.g., theatre, dance).

Accordingly, this chapter is structured into three main sections: the first one has the function of providing a preliminary justification of this approach by arguing for its plausibility. In the second section, I propose a general, *de jure* definition of free musical improvisation, encompassing (without being reduced to) its *de facto* historic-musicological definition. This general definition of free musical improvisation should make it possible to identify a series of improvisational practices, not restricted to the musical field, which constitutes a *tertium datur* between referent-driven improvisations and the accepted notion of free improvisation currently in force in the musical domain – understood, that is, as programmatically avoiding existing referents. In the third (and final) section, I show how some elements of the notion of orientation provide fruitful hermeneutical keys that can help us characterize these two notions of free improvisation from a common perspective.

In some respects this chapter should be considered an initial exploration of a territory that is almost entirely uncharted. In fact, the relation between improvisation and orientation has never (to my knowledge) been explicitly thematized or thoroughly investigated. Still, I believe that an interrelated analysis, such as the one essayed here, can provide fruitful insights into both these distinctively human activities. This is the subject of the first section.

1 Improvisation and Orientation: A Preliminary Analysis

I begin my investigation with a pre-theoretical definition of *orientation* provided in a recent monograph by Werner Stegmaier: the "*achievement of finding's one way*" (Stegmaier 2019: 5). When we orient ourselves in a given situation, we come to *know where we are* and (possibly) *where we have to go* (or what we have to do). Starting with our quotidian acquaintance with this notion, in this section I list a series of elements as a means to argue for the plausibility of the approach adopted in this chapter, namely the use of the notion of orientation as a hermeneutical tool for the understanding of human, and more specifically artistic, improvisation. With this list I intend to provide a first *articulation of a pre-theoretical belief* about the fact that orientation and improvisation, despite

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being intuitively distinct notions and pertaining, in the first instance, to different domains (i.e., perception and action), have something to do with each other.[1] And we do already have some hints of such a relation: sometimes *we must improvise because we are disoriented*; conversely, *in order to successfully improvise, we need to gain – somehow, and at some point in time – a new orientation*. But all this does not yet amount to an argument. It is a sort of *confused representation* of the relation between these two notions, where I here use *confused* in Baumgarten's sense, as *non-articulated perception of a nexus*:

> I perceive the nexus of some things confusedly, and the nexus of some things distinctly. […] I have an intellect that perceives a nexus of things perspicaciously […] i.e. I have REASON. I also have faculties that know a nexus more confusedly. […] All of these, insofar as they are similar to reason in representing the nexus of things, constitute the ANALOGUE OF REASON.
> *(Baumgarten 2014: 232 f.)*

I dwell on this excerpt, which is otherwise apparently not relevant for the argument I intend to develop, for the following reason: while I assume that my analysis aims to furnish an articulation of a pre-theoretical belief, a distinct presentation (*Darstellung*) of a confused representation (*Vorstellung*) of a *nexus* between orientation and improvisation, I am not at all invoking a sort of *sentiment* or *irrational feeling* about it. We guess, we somehow perceive, and sometimes we even presuppose that orientation and improvisation are deeply interrelated; but we have not articulated this perceiving and presupposing in a conceptually robust form. The aim of this section is, therefore, to (start to) accomplish a sort of *hermeneutical task*, that of *starting to explicate the articulated content of this confused representation*, in order to provide a first test of its plausibility.

The strategy I intend to follow is to identify some traits common to both orientation and improvisation – not to lead us to the uninteresting conclusion that they are, *in some respects*, similar, but rather to show that the plausibility of the pre-theoretical belief that they have something to do with each other is *grounded in the identification of some elements in which they both partake*. This formulation will gain determinacy, I hope, in the analysis conducted in the remaining part of this section.

The *first element* to be mentioned is that both orientation and improvisation have essentially to do with the notion of the *unexpected*. That this is an essential feature of orientation is clearly formulated by Werner Stegmaier:

> Orientation must […] be capable of adapting to unpredictable and surprising situations […] i.e. it must be able to change if the situation changes. […] In each situation, orientation tries to cope with something that it does not yet know anything about; and if it knows, it is no longer the same as it was before. In short: orientation must always encounter surprises.
> *(Stegmaier 2019: 1 f. and 29)*

That improvisation has to do with the unforeseen or unexpected is evident (besides the etymology of the term – see, for example, Blum 1998: 37 and Schwan et al. 2016), first, in our daily life; we improvise when we find ourselves in an unexpected situation, for which we *do not have an available plan* (which does not mean that we *only* improvise when we don't have an available plan – see, on this point, Preston 2013: 52–61. On the relation between improvisation and plans, see also Claus Beisbart's contribution to this volume). In the artistic domain, this feature of improvisation has (at least) two interrelated aspects:

1 On the listener's side, improvisation generally has to do with the unexpected. As stated by Alessandro Bertinetto, among others, it is an *execution of something that does not pre-exist its execution:*

> The […] verb "to execute," but also the verb "to interpret" […] presupposes that there is already something (a composition) *to be executed* or *interpreted*: something expected, even by the listener who knows the program of the concert he is about to listen to. Instead, in improvisation […] it is precisely the unexpected that becomes the *highlight* of the aesthetic experience, although the statement that this *unexpected* is *executed* cannot fail to sound oxymoronic and even paradoxical.
>
> *(Bertinetto 2016a: 5; my translation, my italics: M. R.)*

2 On the performer's side, improvisation has to do with the unexpected in group improvisation specifically, where the interactions between improvisers continuously create new situations. Here I refer to Robert Keith Sawyer:

> Improvisational groups are engaged in problem finding – they are not faced with a specific problem to solve, but instead, part of the enjoyment of the performance is in the unexpected moment-to-moment goals that the performers create for themselves. For example, during an extended improvisation of a jazz group, the music may stray quite far from the 32-bar song form that initially inspired the improvisation. By straying from the form, the musicians have collectively created a problem for themselves – how will they return back to the "head," the unison performance of the straight melody?
>
> *(Sawyer 2003: 169)*[2]

The very notion of the unexpected leads to a *second element*, which also concerns both orientation and improvisation – namely, the *time constraint*. In the case of improvisation, again, this point is evident both generally in daily life, and specifically in the artistic domain. In the first case it is clear: when faced with an unexpected situation, we improvise particularly in the case when we don't have the time to prepare a (new) plan. In the case of improvised artistic performances, the time constraint depends, mainly, on the fact that they are paradigmatically *live performances*. In this respect, non-improvised live performances also entail aspects (sometimes relevant) of improvisation. However, the so-called retrospective method, which characterizes improvisation, as opposed to the blueprint method,[3] radicalizes this aspect: the improviser's actions are triggered, in relevant measure, by what has just been performed (by her or her partners), so she has to *respond in real time* to the musical events.

In relation to orientation, the question of the time constraint is again well formulated by Stegmaier:

> That something new can happen presupposes *time* [. …] In situations of orientation, time is experienced as *time shortage* and *time pressure*. Time shortage means that orientation needs time to oversee the situation and to find opportunities to deal with surprising circumstances. Time pressure refers to the fact that time "pressures" one to do now in this situation what can be done successfully. […] Science and particularly philosophy – as far as they are not expected to produce any "cash value" but basic research – enjoy special arrangements to lower the time pressure; they are (or were) allowed to "take time" for their research. This privilege could be one reason why philosophy has so far mainly ignored the needs of orientation.
>
> *(Stegmaier 2019: 31)*

In my view, the last part of this excerpt should point us towards different conclusions, as it shows how, unlike improvisation (at least in the performing arts), orientation is not so strictly connected with time constraints. Philosophy and science – or, more modestly, scientists and philosophers – as well as artists sometimes *take time* for reorientation, and this taking time is required by an *explicit*

need for reorientation, which, therefore, does not remain as an unexpressed presupposition. In this respect, as Rudolf Makkreel eminently showed, in Kant we have the elements for the formulation of a *reflective orientation* (Makkreel 2007: 55–80), where, evidently, the question of time constraints plays a minor role and which, therefore, has not much to do with improvisation. When we take our time to reflect and re-orient ourselves we do not improvise: sometimes we take our time because we *don't want to* improvise.[4] This reflective re-orientation plays the role of a sort of plan, according to which we can, in a second moment, adequately tackle or solve an unexpected situation. However, it remains clear that orientation *can deal* with time constraints and, when this is the case, it plausibly entertains a relevant relation with improvisation.

One of the aspects stressed by Stegmaier in the last passage (and this is our *third element*) is the fact that time pressures the disoriented person to *identify in the unexpected event an opportunity*. This aspect is described by Stegmaier in the lines immediately after the quoted passage as the *kairological dimension* of orientation:

> New relevant occurrences in a situation do not only put one under pressure. They can also become *opportunities*. Opportunities are favorable, but temporary occurrences to succeed in a situation; they must be recognized and made use of in the situation. For what makes up an opportunity, there is again no higher criterion: it arises now for this orientation in this situation; it is an opportunity only in this situation […]. As far as orientation uses opportunities, it is a matter of *Kairos*, which the ancient Greeks greatly appreciated. Making good use of the favorable time when opportunities arise leads to the desired balance in each situation.
>
> *(Stegmaier 2019: 31 f.)*

The kairological dimension of improvisation, specifically at the artistic level, is formulated in the statement that, in jazz, and more generally musical (or event-theatrical) improvisation, *any mistake is potentially an opportunity*. This idea, eminently expressed by venerated figures of jazz in similar statements according to which in jazz *there are no mistakes, only wrong resolutions*,[5] is very well articulated by Bertinetto:

> Even unintentional "mistakes" can be artistic resources, provided performers respond adequately to the incidents and take from them the opportunity to creatively shape a different normative order, which works for the new, previously unexpected, situation.
>
> *(Bertinetto 2016b: 91)*

One further aspect related to the temporal aspect of improvisation (our *fourth* element) consists in the fact that it has to do not only with the *unexpected present*, but also with an *uncertain future*: the decisions taken by the improviser have no certain consequences. They can bring fruitful developments but just as well can lead to dead-ends. The improviser, as explained by Jocelyn Lachance in relation to improvisational theater (for music see Nettl et al. 2001), has to, therefore, *take risks*:

> The content of the improvisation, the sense of the story, is changeable at all moments, according to the information obtained on the characters, the passage from one imaginary place to another, the entrance on stage of a new actor, etc. It's hard to predict the next reply, as it seeks to surprise. The improviser builds a project whose outcome is still uncertain. The value of taking the risk is rooted in this part of chance that the actor is trying to manage.
>
> *(Lachance 2007: 104; my translation: M. R.)*[6]

This aspect of uncertainty, as well as the necessary courage to take risks, is also characteristic of orientation:

> Because every orientation is under uncertainty, new situations always require one to take such risks; if everything were for certain, then nothing would happen and one would not need to orient oneself. […] As far as attention makes one's orientation aware of dangers and risks as well as of favorable opportunities in a situation, it also includes *courage:* the courage to face dangers, to take unavoidable risks, and to grasp promising opportunities – in each case without any certainty of success.
>
> *(Stegmaier 2019: 31, 34)*

In fact, one can go beyond Stegmaier's configuration, in which taking risks and grasping opportunities are considered in parallel as two actions related to courage. Both in improvisation and in orientation, it seems to us, risks and opportunities *not only run alongside each other, but are strictly interconnected*. In order to make an opportunity out of an unexpected event, it is not enough to *recognize* such an opportunity, you have also to *take* it. And in order to seize such an opportunity, by which you confront yourself with uncertainty, you have to – at least in some cases – take *risks*. Courage, in this respect, is what enables us to actualize an opportunity through a brave decision.[7]

However, orientation and improvisation are not constituted only of courageous decisions: they do not concern only situations of instability where risks have to be taken in order to seize opportunities, but also stable situations where actions are no longer regulated by *brave decisions, but rather by established routines*. The importance of routines in both orientation and improvisation is clearly expressed in the following two excerpts, where we can also notice how they play similar stabilizing functions, providing elements of familiarity, patterns, and structures, within which the improviser feels at home:

> The self attains an initial stability through the fact that the orientation processes become regular, that they gain a certain *regularity* […]. With the experience of regularity, an orientation becomes something *familiar:* instead of unsettlement, reassuring calmness sets in. […] *Familiarity (Vertrautheit) which develops when everything "runs as usual" is the basic stability of orientation*. Orientation obtains its first kind of confidence: it gains a *routine*. […] The "knowledge" that allows one to easily proceed on paved ways, or […] the "confident mastery" of well-established orientations processes is then a "routine," which one "has."
>
> *(Stegmaier 2019: 83)*

> Improv theater often relies on precomposed phrases. The improvised Italian renaissance theater *commedia dell'arte* used *lazzi*, comic bits and memorized poetic speeches. Although these phrases and speeches were not invented in the moment, they could be recombined in an infinite number of ways, and thus still required improvisational skill. Contemporary Chicago improvisers quickly rediscovered the benefits of employing scripted routines. In speaking about the early Compass Players, Mike Nichols said that "for every one of those times [where improvisation inspired you] there were, let's say, ten when you relied on certain tricks and certain things you'd done before and certain gimmicks you knew always worked" (Sweet 1978: 78) […]. Most of the audience cannot know how much of the performance is a repeated scripted bit, because they will only see one performance of the show. Likewise, most jazz audiences cannot tell the difference between a truly improvised melodic phrase, and a well-worn lick that the musician has played a hundred times before.
>
> *(Sawyer 2003: 59 f.)*[8]

I have identified five elements shared by both orientation and improvisation. One could say that while the first three (unexpected events, time-constraint, and kairological time structure) show *how improvisation and orientation both face situations sharing common elements*, the last two (taking risks and establishing routines) show *how we deal with such situations in different modalities*. This analysis was meant, on the one hand, to articulate our pre-theoretical belief that orientation and improvisation have something to do with each other and, on the other hand, to be a preliminary test of the plausibility of the approach adopted in the third and last section – that is, to see how orientation can work in the specific case of improvisation that we label *free improvisation*. Before that, however, I intend in the next section to investigate the notion of free improvisation, in order to specify its meaning. I will develop my investigation in the musical domain, as it offers a very instructive example of the possible differing uses of this notion. However, the considerations developed there can be applied to other arts as well, at least in the domain of the performing arts.

2 The Notion of Free Improvisation in Music: *de facto* and *de jure* Definition

In the musical domain, there is one *established and legitimate way* to provide a definition of "free improvisation": treating it as historical-musicological notion, i.e., a notion that denotes a specific historical-musical fact (Sturzenegger calls it "historische freie Improvisation" [2010: 16]). This is explicitly adopted by Clément Canonne in one of his articles devoted to this notion:

> The so-called "free" improvisation emerged in Europe and the United States at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s, at the crossroads of two traditions […]: jazz, on the one hand, and in particular the free jazz practiced by musicians like Ornette Coleman, Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra, who are largely free from a certain number of codes hitherto central in jazz (notably the use of chord changes as a support for improvisation); and contemporary cultivated music, on the other, and in particular this aesthetic of indeterminacy which flourished in the years 1950–1960 through open works, graphic scores and other verbal scores by composers like Earle Brown, Christian Wolff, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Luc Ferrari, Henri Pousseur or Philip Corner.
>
> *(Canonne 2016: 17; my translation: M. R.)*

It is interesting, however, to notice that Derek Bailey, mentioned subsequently in Canonne's article as one of the "pioneers of the free improvisation," in his classical study of improvisation, gives a quite different definition:

> Freely improvised music, variously called "total improvisation," "open improvisation," "free music," or perhaps most often simply, "improvised music," suffers from – and enjoys – the confused identity which its resistance to labelling indicates. It is a logical situation: freely improvised music is an activity which encompasses too many different concepts of what improvisation is, even, for it all to be subsumed under one name. […] Historically, it pre-dates any other music – mankind's first musical performance couldn't have been anything other than a free improvisation – and I think that it is reasonable speculation that at most times since then there will have been some music-making most aptly described as free improvisation.
>
> *(Bailey 1992: 83)*

One way to deal with such different definitions is to distinguish between a *strong* and a *weak* notion of musical improvisation, the former possessing strictly defined criteria, the latter vague ones (from now on, for the sake of brevity and clarity, I will label these, respectively, "free-improvisation*" and "free-improvisation**"). This approach is not incorrect per se, but, in my

view, misses the point. A possible alternative consists of interpreting such a difference as the result of two different usages of the notion of free improvisation – a historical-musicological one and a theoretical one. An even better understanding of this difference becomes visible, however, when we confront in detail how improvisation is characterized in the two cases. To anticipate what will be argued in the next few pages, we can talk of a difference between a *de facto* definition, which enumerates the characteristics of some music that *happened to be called* free improvisation, and a *de jure* definition, which identifies some characteristics that would *justify* the label of *free* improvisation for a musical performance or praxis.

Let's go into detail: Canonne (2016: 33–36) enumerates five elements (in this respect, free improvisation★ paradoxically assumes the connotations almost of a *genre*) that characterize free improvisation★. Free improvisation★ is *free*, i.e., with "no referent" (see Pressing's excerpt below); *non-idiomatic*, as in trying to avoid existing idioms; *collective*, mainly practiced in ensembles; *processual*, trying to induce the free flow of inspiration; and *experimental*, essentially engaged in with the intent to explore new idioms or even new instrumental techniques.

The elements that are decisive for my argument are the first two. In fact, free improvisation★ identifies itself also by *essentially trying to avoid any reference to existing idioms or musical material* inherited by tradition (for the sake of simplicity I will group both points under the label "referential," thereby considering idioms too to be as a *sort of referent*). David Toop offers the following eloquent formulation:

> The type of improvisation that concerns me here exacerbates the problem through its basic aims: to make a music without score, notation, image or text, composer, director or conductor; a music *spurning reliance on tradition*, established forms or hierarchies of labour; lacking in plans, rules or protocols of any kind other than the act of playing through listening. The reality has been more complex, differentiated and variable than that, of course, but utopian aims separate this type of improvisation – once known as free improvisation, free music, open music or, simply, free; now skewered by the infantilizing abbreviation of improv – from more or less codified, often very ancient styles of idiomatic improvisation.
>
> *(Toop 2016: 16, my italics: M. R.)*

The expression "spurning reliance" is significant: in this respect, the predicate *non*-referential should, in my view, be substituted by *anti*-referential.[9] It is important, however, to note that such programmatic refusal of elements inherited from tradition is not ascribed to free improvisation★★, for which we can consider two classical definitions:

> Central to improvisation is the notion of the "referent." The referent is an underlying formal scheme or guiding image specific to a given piece, used by the improviser to facilitate the generation and editing of improvised behaviour on an intermediate time scale. […] If no referent is present, or if it is devised in real-time, we speak of "free" or "absolute" improvisation. This is much rarer than referent-guided, or "relative" improvisation.
>
> *(Pressing 1984: 346)*

> [Free Improvisation] has no stylistic or idiomatic commitment. It has no prescribed idiomatic sound. The characteristics of freely improvised music are established only by the sonic-musical identity of the person or persons playing it.
>
> *(Bailey 1992: 83; see also Fähndrich 2007: 185; my translation: M. R.)*

The *theoretical difference* between these latter two definitions and the previous one can be formulated as follows: being characterized by the *non-commitment to* existing referents, rather than by the

programmatic refusal of them, free improvisation★★ is genuinely non-referential rather than anti-referential (as is free improvisation★). This is clarified by Bailey in another passage:

> Idiomatic improvisation, much the most widely used, is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom – such as jazz, flamenco or baroque – and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom. Non-idiomatic improvisation has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called "free" improvisation and, while it can be highly stylised, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity.
>
> *(Bailey 1992: xi–xii)*

The *practical difference* consists mainly in the fact that the second one allows so-called *appropriations*, a term employed to characterize the use of idiomatic or thematic elements from other traditions. So, to take one classic example in this respect, when Robert Walser describes Eddie van Halen's "quotation of the best-known cliché of violin pedagogy, an etude by Rodolphe Kreutzer" (Walser 1992: 272), performed in his most famous guitar solo, "Eruption," by using the term "appropriation," he implicitly stresses, among other things, that in that solo Van Halen did not intend to give a *rendition* of Kreutzer, and none of Van Halen's fans will ever (most probably) formulate an aesthetic judgment based on expectations in this respect. In other words, Van Halen is not *interpreting* Kreutzer; he is, rather, only *using it as referent* in order to construct *his musical discourse*.

Now, *Eruption* is a solo, not improvised but composed; yet heavy metal is replete with improvised solos where references to themes or idioms are evident: Van Halen several times improvised solos in which material from *Eruption*, including quotations from Kreutzer, is used. However, in these cases too it would be difficult to talk about free improvisation★★: heavy metal, in fact, is an idiom, at least in a wide sense, and its public has the correlative "expectations of a genre" (to use a formula from Toop 2016: 16).[10]

Still, the notion of appropriation can also be used in other cases of musical improvisation that are usually (including by Canonne and Bertinetto) labeled *free improvisation*, notably Keith Jarrett's piano solos. It is clear from a first hearing of any of his solo concerts that they should not be labeled as free improvisation★, as he makes massive use of musical material inherited from the tradition, starting from harmonic and contrapuntal structures. Besides, as the following excerpt shows, his solos can be stylistically analyzed as making use of certain repeating idioms, without these in any sense being planned (and so without having undertaken a corresponding *commitment*):[11]

> While Jarrett himself has claimed that his improvisations avoid any structural planning, I examine a sense in which they employ certain stylistic models, or simply "styles." This is not to suggest that there is anything pre-planned in these performances, but rather that the "architectures" which Jarrett talks of in the epigraph quotation above may come to function in a similar way to compositional organization. […] These templates seem to function as something akin to what Jeff Pressing calls "referents," as they serve to provide parameters which guide the generation of music.
>
> *(Elsdon 2008: 51 f., 66)*

Given this, Jarrett's solo improvisations should be catalogued as free improvisation★★, since they do not avoid idiomatic or other kind of referents; rather, they *use them in order to construct an autonomous discourse*. Thereby Jarrett does not commit to them in advance, nor does he generate legitimate expectations in the public.[12]

I spoke previously about a distinction between a *de facto* and *de jure* definition, and I want to end this section by clarifying this formula. The reason why the definition of free improvisation★★ as *non-referential* (non-committed to any given style or musical material) rather than *anti-referential*

(programmatically avoiding any reference to existing idioms or musical material, as free improvisation★ aims to do) should be considered a *de jure* definition is the following: free improvisation★★ is also *free from the anti-referential dogma*. Accordingly, an improviser *can avoid, but is not committed to* avoiding, any reference to existing musical idioms or material. In other words, while Keith Jarrett is free to quote whatever he wants, this is not the case for any performer claiming to perform free-improvisation★. A recognizable quotation of a musical work or a passage of improvisation in a recognizable style would be enough to exclude such a performance from the category of free improvisation★, and to generate disappointment (or at least surprise) in the audience, which was legitimately expecting to listen to something else. In this respect, as paradoxical as it may sound, Keith Jarrett quoting recognizable themes or playing in recognizable styles is *freer* than any performer of free improvisation★. He has added possibilities to the extent that he *did not undertake any idiomatic commitment*, not even that of avoiding any idiomatic reference. For that simple reason, I think that we should stick with a *de jure* definition of free improvisation★★, which *encompasses* performances of free improvisation★ without *limiting itself* to it. Free improvisation★ should, therefore, be understood as a particular case of free improvisation★★, one that *may not make use* of pre-existing idioms or musical material: a *free-improvisation★★ without appropriations*.

In a previous article on this topic (Ruta 2017) I referred to all this as a necessary condition of free improvisation, namely, the fact of being *non-interpretative*. Free improvisation★★, whether or not it makes use of existing musical material or styles, is not meant to give a rendition of them. However, a necessary condition is not yet a sufficient one. How can we distinguish a free improvisation★★ from the random playing of a two-year-old, or from a virtuoso medley of different styles and quotations? In order to answer this questions, I will make use of the notion of *orientation*. And this is the subject of the next and final section of this chapter.

3 Compass Orientation and Improvisation: A Hermeneutical Proposal

The notion of orientation can be usefully employed as a hermeneutical tool for *understanding what happens* in improvisational performances generally, and not only in free improvisation★★. To take some musical examples (although these considerations can be plausibly applied to other domains as well) one can improvise in a Bach style (as does Mozart in Milos Forman's movie *Amadeus*), on a given theme (as Bach presumably did in the case of *The Musical Offering*), or on a specific song (as in the case of Standard Jazz). In all these cases it seems plausible to say that a referent, thematic or idiomatic, *orients* a given performance; in this respect, we have already seen usage of the notion of "guidance" (which seems to imply orientation) in the previous quotations from Pressing and Elsdon, so we have "referent-guided" improvisations as well as referents that "guide the generation of music."

Although the use of the term "orientation" in the artistic domain is admittedly metaphorical, I intend to argue for the legitimacy of such a metaphorical usage, and this last section is to be considered as a first step in this direction. I will start, again, with Stegmaier:

> It is […] this use of *anthropomorphic language* that makes the research on animal orientation insightful […] for the exploration of human orientation as well. As such, the study of the *long-distance orientation of animals* distinguishes between a compass-track orientation and a target orientation […]. Compass orientation determines the direction – or simply the "track" – of migrations; and target orientation determines the target on this "track."
>
> *(Stegmaier 2019: 20)*

Stegmaier's distinction is analogous to the one formulated by R. Keith Sawyer in the domain of improvisational theater, the one between a *meta-constraint* provided by the improvisational genre,

and the *individual constraints* emerging during the performance (Sawyer 2003: 89–90). I prefer, in my analysis, to stick with orientation-related concepts, at least for the reason that the notion of meta-constraint seems not to be too useful in the analysis of free improvisation★★, which, as being non-committed, has no meta-constraints.[13] However, I maintain that Sawyer's distinction is a useful one in order to explain some improvisational processes, including in the musical domain, in orientational terms. Thus, while different *targets* can "emerge" (like how to resolve a harmonic movement, respond to a gambit by a partner, or develop a particular idiomatic figure) during an improvisation, thereby providing orientation in a particular moment of the performance, it is *compass orientation* that can give an *overall direction* to an improvisation (free or not). In order to see how compass orientation can play this role, we have to go into further detail.

The use of the notion of *compass* (*Kompass*) in non-geographical contexts is to be found in Kant. The most popular occurrence is in his essay *What Does it Mean to Orient Oneself in Thinking?*, where he affirms that ideas of reason (like the Idea of God) can fruitfully orient human thinking in its excursions:

> Rational faith, which rests on a need of reason's use with a practical intent, could be called a postulate of reason. […] A pure rational faith is therefore the signpost or compass by means of which the speculative thinker orients himself in his rational excursions into the field of supersensible objects.
>
> *(Kant 1998: 11)*[14]

I intend, *firstly and generally*, to use such a metaphor in order to define free improvisation★★ as *autonomy-oriented non-interpretative artistic performance*. Here, autonomy has to be understood not only negatively, as non-heteronomy or as *non-commitment to pre-existing norms*, but also positively, as the striving for *building its own norms via a performance of it*. This aspect of improvisation has recently been stressed both by Bertinetto and Bertram, although on different occasions and with different modalities.[15] In the chapter included in this volume, Bertram uses the formula of *norm in statu nascendi*: free improvisation gives its own norms to itself *by performing* it. For the same reason, and not only in the case of free improvisation★★, the notion of *imperfection*, which seems to presuppose the existence of a norm *preceding the performance and regulating it*, on an attentive analysis presents problems that are possibly unresolvable (see note 3).

I intend now, *secondly and specifically*, to show how such a definition can be useful in order to explain two essential improvisational devices deployed in free improvisation, in both forms (anti-idiomatic and non-idiomatic) previously taken into consideration.[16] This definition will allow us to bring two different things under the same heading, and to explain what differentiates a free improvisation from, on the one side, a random performance and, on the other, a medley of different styles and themes.

The orientational function of the notion of autonomy is exemplified first by the *retrospective method*, a formula originally devised by Ted Gioia (see note 3) and clearly illustrated by this statement from Max Roach, used by Berliner as the exergue of the eighth chapter of his classical work on jazz:

> After you initiate the solo, one phrase determines what the next is going to be. From the first note that you hear, you are responding to what you've just played: you just said this on your instrument, and now that's a constant. What follows from that? And so on and so forth. And finally, let's wrap it up so that everybody understands that that's what you're doing.
>
> *(Berliner 1994: 192)*[17]

Accordingly, in free improvisation★ the orientational role of the idea of autonomy is mainly (even if not exclusively) a *constructive* one, as the performer has to produce, on the spot, some immanent

normative criteria in order to organize its discourse, without recurring to external styles or conventions given in advance. This process is what Bertram defines as norms in *statu nascendi*, and what differentiates a free improvisation★ from a (hypothetical) performance, where players, solo or in a group, randomly play their instruments. Free improvisation★, as autonomy-oriented, does not exclude normativity, but only a pre-fabricated (heteronomous) one.

In the more general case of free improvisation★★ – and specifically, when the appropriation of styles and idioms is put in place – we have another, additional configuration of the orientational role of autonomy, namely a *transgressional* one. In an improvisational performance where an existing idiom is appropriated in order to build an autonomous artistic discourse, the simple retrospective method cannot function *alone*, because it would sooner or later produce a static situation in which the performer is somehow *imprisoned* in the idiom or style exemplified at a certain moment, constituting a sort of *gravitational field* that impedes a discourse exceeding its limits. It is the orientational role of the idea of autonomy that, in such performances, invites the improviser to *risk transgression*, by *interrupting* the musical flow regulated by a particular idiom or structure.[18] This analysis related to Jarrett's *Lausanne Concert* can furnish a good example of what is meant by all this:

> The transgression is a breaking of the normative expectations of the vamp. This device is heard as a clear and intentional disruption to the flow of the music. It is a kind of dramatic rhetorical gesture in which the scaffolding that holds the music together is dismantled, or rather swept deliberately aside. This gesture might be understood to represent what the critic John Corbett calls a quest for "reterritory," or, rather, a deliberate courting of the unknown by rejecting the familiar. […] I have suggested that the analysis of Jarrett's solo improvisations and their underlying architecture might involve the identification of the fundamental stylistic templates which he appears to draw on. […] By using styles in recognisable figurations and progressions, Jarrett sets up patterns which not only create expressive effects, but which can then be transgressed in order to convey the taking of risk.
>
> *(Elsdon 2008: 66)*

These *transgressions through* disruptions are in fact what transform such idiom-guided moments of an improvisation into *appropriations*. It is in the freedom shown by the capacity to break with them, and with any specific idiom in general, that the improviser(s) re-affirm(s) autonomy. In that case, the predicate *autonomy-oriented* allows us to differentiate free improvisation★★ from a medley, or an improvised performance simply playing with different idioms without committing to any of them.[19]

While, in my argument, musical free improvisation has played the role of paradigmatic example, with the predicate *autonomy-oriented* I intend to provide a plausible *sufficient condition* for defining an improvisational performance as free-improvisation★★ – and not only in the musical domain. On the one side, the notion of *autonomy* allows us to go beyond the simple concept of non-commitment; on the other, the notion of *orientation* allows us to avoid a characterization of its function in terms of *verticality*, which would, in my view, be implicitly entailed in the usage of similar notions like *ideal* or *regulative concept*.[20] It is clear that a free improvisation, with either one or two asterisks, *is not better the more autonomous it is*. Again, improvisation is not more or less perfect, but more or less felicitous.[21] While many other factors *contribute to the success* of a free improvisation, it is the notion of autonomy that *orients* it, by playing the role of *compass*, as stressed before, and not of an *ideal* or *model* to be fulfilled more or less adequately.

The question should, thus, not be cast in *psychological* or *phenomenological* terms (such as: How can we detect whether such an orientational role is effectively playing out in the mind of the improvising artists?) but, rather, in terms of *aesthetic judgment*. To make a comparison with improvisational theater: an audience attending a very felicitous improvised performance, supposedly of Commedia

dell'Arte, but where no elements of that theatrical idiom are recognizable, can legitimately ask: "nice performance, but where is Commedia dell'Arte?" In the same vein, in the case of a musical improvisation that is claimed to be *free*, but that reveals itself to be only a random performance or a simple patchwork of different styles and themes, with no trace of inner processing, one could legitimately ask: "Interesting performance, but where is the autonomy?" Again using Toop's formula, I do assume that an audience attending a free improvisation** *should not have expectations of genre*.[22] In this respect, free improvisation** is radically *non-interpretative*, as it is not even an individual rendition of a style or idiom. However, such an audience *may legitimately have (at least) one expectation*: being present at a non-interpretative artistic performance that strives to produce its own discourse, and so whose orientational compass is the idea of autonomy – namely, one of the main notions according to which the term "freedom" has been interpreted in the Western philosophical tradition.

Related Topics

Arthurs, T. (This Volume) " The Risk of Improvised Music: An Ethnographic Approach."
Beisbart, C. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Action Theory."
Bertram, G. (This Volume) "Improvisation as Normative Practice."

Notes

1 This is also supported by the usage of the notion of orientation in some classical texts about improvisation. See, for example, Berliner 1994: 641 and Bailey 1992: 86, 114.

2 The interactive aspect of theatre-improvisation can be further radicalized by setting the audience on the stage (Elsner-Siedenburg 2017: 219). On the other hand, as Annemarie Matzke correctly stresses, by referring to Stanislavski's writings on theatre, the element of the unexpected can also be constituted by "a moment of self-surprising," causing a sort of "alienation from its own doing," which can be triggered by a sort of *improvisational dispositive* (Matzke 2010: 171 f.; my translation: M. R.).

3 "The blueprint method is most clearly represented, as one might gather from its name, in architecture. Here the artist plans in advance every detail of the work of art before beginning any part of its execution. […] Improvisation follows not the blueprint method but the retrospective method. The improviser may be unable to look ahead at what he is going to play, but he can look behind what he has just played; thus each new musical phrase can be shaped with relation to what has gone before. The same technique can be applied to the other arts, but this is generally the exception rather than the rule" (Gioia 1987: 593 f.). On this concept, see also Feige 2014 and Bertinetto 2014. This latter, while adopting Gioia's distinction, criticizes the very notion of an *aesthetics of imperfection* endorsed by Gioia in the same article.

4 Also in that case, however, a link with improvisation can be envisaged by acknowledging that reflective judgments have an essential *provisional* character, as they are neither methodically acquired nor in search of the apodictic certainty proper to judgments of natural sciences. In this respect, reflective orientation entails (without being reduced to) a *slowed-down improvisation in thinking*. And, as in the case of improvisation (see Bertinetto 2014), it can be more or less *felicitous*, while no success-criteria are given in advance. See on this point, specifically, Makkreel 2007: 93–9.

5 "Art Tatum has a good point in this regard: 'There's no such thing as a wrong note. It all depends on how you resolve it'. The same idea is expressed by Bill Evans ('There are no wrong notes, only wrong resolutions') and again by Miles Davis: 'There are no wrong notes in jazz. Only notes in the wrong places'" (Bertinetto 2016b: 88).

6 Concerning specifically the musical domain, a thoughtful analysis of the risk involved in improvised performances is provided by Tom Arthurs in the chapter included in this volume. In this same chapter, Arthurs furnishes also an important account, based on interviews with musicians, of the notion of "music searching" in improvised music, which implicitly reinforces the approach adopted in my article, as I believe.

7 The importance of courage, specifically in the context of free-improvisation, is implicitly acknowledged by Gary Peters, who notes a "widespread fear of free-improvisation, both among audiences […] and performers. […] Whenever and wherever improvisation figures in performance art, fear management becomes the central problem and task" (Peters 2009: 44).

8 In the case of music, it has to be added that routines are not confined to evident and audible "musical fragments," melodically recognizable; as Berliner very well describes it, an improviser can (and almost always does) have a repertory of "patterns with low melodic content" (Berliner 1994: 228), including rhythmic and harmonic structures, as well as memorized scales in particular modes and figures.

9 For the political dimension of this aspect, see Peters 2009: 21 f. and 172 note 2. Specifically for the Swiss context, see Sturzenegger 2010: 16. On the other side, Canonne stresses the connection of this aspect with the notion of *authenticity* (Canonne 2016: 36).

10 I do not intend to enter into the question of whether heavy metal is to be considered a genre. Although the question is surely interesting and remains open, it is beyond the limits of this chapter. For a recent account, see Gracyk 2016.

11 On the relation between plans and commitments, see Bratman 1987, particularly chapter 7.

12 Of course, people familiar with Jarrett's solo improvisations may have some expectations in this respect; equally, one may have certain expectations about the performance style of Lang Lang playing Chopin. But this does not mean that Lang Lang thereby ever committed to play Chopin in a certain way on a particular evening.

13 On the connection between commitment and constraints, see (among others) Brandom 1994: 332.

14 A very similar use of this word is to be found in theoretical writings composed in the same period, as in the preface of the *Prolegomena* (Kant 1997: 58) and in *What Real Progress Has Metaphysics Made in Germany Since the Time of Leibniz and Wolff?* (Kant 2004: 355). These occurrences do not all refer to the same idea of what should serve as metaphysical orientation. What they have in common, rather, is the idea of metaphysics as a sort of *theoretical navigation*, where the possibility of losing the right track is always there and which must, therefore, be oriented by a compass. For the problematic aspects of Kant's metaphorical use of this notion, see Thomä 2005: 289–93.

15 See, among others, Bertram 2010; 2019 (particularly Chapter 3), Bertinetto 2014, and very recently Bertinetto and Bertram 2020. As stressed by Bertram (2019), such a notion of autonomy concerns the internal constitution of artworks and not the supposed separation (*Absonderung*) of art practices from other social practices. This latter notion of autonomy is criticized by Bertram and does not play any role in my argument.

16 Besides the notion of *compass*, many other heuristic concepts, like *foothold* or *horizon*, can, in my view, be used fruitfully in order to analyze how an improvisational performance could progress, what obstacles it could encounter, and what resources it can draw upon in order to overcome them (see among others Canonne 2013, although it contains no explicit reference to orientation-related notions). This last section of the article is, in this respect, to be considered a first step in this direction.

17 Such a process can of course involve also collective improvisation, as Bailey's report of a moment in a concert by the Music Improvisation Company in Durham suggests (Bailey 1992: 95). In this respect, retrospective and dialogic processes are not necessarily in competition, but can (even if they don't have to) cooperate towards the same result.

18 In fact the notion of *transgression*, as well as that of *interruption*, also heavily affects free improvisation★, but is more associated with the process of experimenting with musical and instrumental limits (see, for example, Guionnet 2008: 136). In such situations, the orientational role of autonomy is less evident. It is not about exiting from *a given idiomatic context*, but rather of *testing new possibilities*, instrumental or more generally musical. Here the orientational role, it seems to me, is played more by notions such as *curiosity* or *experimentalism*, than by autonomy, as there is no heteronomy to be escaped.

19 This is the same point, it seems to me, stressed by Watson in relation to Bailey's supposed *Afrocentric style*: "Bailey's own instrumental approach – with its harmonic negation and rhythmic determinacy – might be said to tilt towards an Afrocentric rather than a European concept […]. The point is the productive process, not a choice between readymade alternatives" (Watson 2004: 217). For a different view, see Hamilton 2007: 207, 212.

20 The two notions have been employed by Lydia Goehr to explain how Western musical practice, starting (roughly) from the 19th century, has been progressively driven by the idea of the Musical Work. There is surely a semantic affinity between these notions. However, I prefer to stick with the orientational metaphor, as it avoids any implicit assumption of criteria of adequacy, which would be untenable in the improvisational domain.

21 This point, in my view, also allows us to avoid the legitimate questions posed by Gary Peters about the "aporia of freedom" entailed in the notion of autonomy, such as Berlin's positive liberty. Improvisation can be seen as the "aesthetic space wherein the aporia of liberty is enacted and reenacted" (Peters 2009: 23) only if we conceive of autonomy as *ideal*, which could possibly never (not only in improvisation) be fully exemplified. Cook, in the same vein, talks of the concept of free improvisation as "self-defeating" (Cook 2013: 226).

22 Of course *it may have* such expectations. But they would be *non-demanding* ones, as not based on a previous commitment of the artists. See also note 12.

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7

IMPROVISATION AND ACTION THEORY

Claus Beisbart

1 Introduction

Suppose that Imogene is improvising on the piano. There is a little puzzle in which we ask ourselves whether she is acting intentionally or not. On the one hand, her improvising seems clearly intentional – it is not involuntary, and Imogene is fully accountable for her improvising. Intentional agency seems, indeed, a crucial component of improvisation. As Kania puts it,

> one cannot necessarily tell just from listening to performance whether it is improvised, or which aspects of it are; there is an intentional aspect to improvisation.
>
> *(Kania 2011: 395)*

On the other hand, improvisation is clearly not intentional as follows: What is done during improvisation does not execute prior intentions or a prior plan. Quite the contrary, improvisation is characteristically unplanned.

How does this fit together? In the words of Angelino,

> how do we find the way to characterize the proper intentionality of improvisation, which is an unplanned yet intentional action?
>
> *(Angelino 2019: 203)*

To answer this question, it seems appropriate to draw on the philosophy of action or action theory. This is a sub-discipline of philosophy, one of the central questions of it being what intentional action is (see O'Connor and Sandis 2012 for a recent companion). It is, thus, no surprise for Kania to state that,

> [c]learly, anything more than a sketch of an account [sc. of] improvisation would require more to be said about the nature of these "decisions" [i.e., the decision made during the performance] and intentional action more generally.
>
> *(Kania 2011: 402)*

Recourse to the philosophy of action seems appropriate too in this context because improvising is not just a sort of artistic performance, but also a general mode of doing things.

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But hoping to solve the problem by using resources from the philosophy of action may be in vain. It may well be that mainstream philosophy of action has problems when it comes to accommodating improvisation. This, at least, has been claimed by Preston (2013) and Angelino (2019).

This chapter aims to discuss improvisation from an action-theoretic perspective. In particular, I will address the puzzle mentioned at the beginning of this chapter in more detail. To do so, I will first review some key insights from the philosophy of action in Section 2. Section 3 discusses improvisation in a broad sense. In Section 4, this discussion is brought to bear on artistic improvisation. Section 5 offers a resolution to the puzzle. I will draw my conclusions in Section 6.

Before I start, I should add three remarks. First, in discussing artistic improvisation in this chapter, I am exclusively concerned with improvisation as a kind of performance (cf. Bresnahan 2015). I will, thus, concentrate on the performing arts. I will most often use examples from musical improvisation, but my results are supposed to be applicable to all performances that can be called improvisations. Here, "performance" is taken in a broad sense; in particular, I do not restrict myself to public performances (Bertinetto 2012a: 131, by contrast, focuses on improvisation qua public performance). Further, throughout this chapter, my focus will be laid on improvisation qua activity and not on its results or products, e.g., the sequence of sounds that a particular improvisation produces (see Alperson 1984: 18; Bertinetto 2012b: 106; Bresnahan 2015: 573 for this distinction).

Second, as far as the relation of this chapter to existing research literature is concerned, previous philosophical work on the notion of improvisation is clearly relevant here (see Bresnahan 2015 for a recent overview), and I will discuss related work in Sections 4 and 5. Concerning the action-theoretic perspective on artistic improvisation, there is not much available in the literature. Notable exceptions are Preston (2013), Bertinetto (2015), and Angelino (2019), all of which I will come back to in due course.

Third, my focus is on improvisation performed by an individual artist. Most results from this chapter can be generalized to collective improvisation, but this needs more work than I can provide here.

2 Plans, Intentions, and Intentional Action

To clarify in which sense improvisation is intentional, we first need to understand intentional action. In what follows, I will summarize key insights from the mainstream philosophy of action. For this purpose, I will draw on work by M. Bratman and assume that his account of intention and planning is on the right track.

Intentional action is part of what people are doing (in a broad sense, including omissions). What people do can be analyzed into and described in various ways. Suppose, for instance, that a person is pumping water in a cistern (see Anscombe 2000: § 23 for this example). What this person is doing can be split up in smaller units, e.g., pushing the pump. Since the water is poisoned and led to a house, the person can also be said to be poisoning the inhabitants of the house.

Not everything that people do is done intentionally. For instance, if the agent does not know that her pumping the water into the house will poison the inhabitants, she is not intentionally poisoning the inhabitants. In general, we can say that Imogene's doing X is intentional if, and only if, she wants to do something with her doing X (see Davidson 1963 and Smith 1998 for an elaboration of this idea). Further, it is natural to say that the relevant sense of wanting here is intending; accordingly, an agent's doing X qualifies as an intentional action if, and only if, she intends something by her doing X. Thus, the presence of a specific mental state called "intention" makes the difference as to whether doing X is intentional or not.

This intention need not be the intention to do X, however. Suppose, for instance, that Imogene is running a marathon. She is aware that she wears down her sneakers in this way. She cares

a lot about her sneakers, but she has finally decided to pay this cost. It then is plausible to say that Imogene intentionally wears down her sneakers. Still, she does not have the intention of wearing down her sneakers (Bratman 1999: 123).

So the relationship between intentional action and intention is more indirect. According to Bratman, if an agent does X intentionally, then she has an intention to do something, but what she intends does not need not be X, but can, instead, be something different (ibid.: 119–26). To make clear that X was done, but that the intention was Y rather than X, we can say that X was done *with the intention* of doing Y (ibid.: 128 ff.; see Setiya 2018: Section 2 for more on the relationship between intention and intentional action).

Some intentions are formed almost simultaneously with the intended action, e.g., when Imogene tries to catch a ball thrown at her (ibid.: 126). In this case, we can call the action spontaneous. But the intention may also have been formed earlier. In this case, it is called a *prior* intention. In either case, we should not assume that the intention always goes back to practical deliberation or that forming the intention (or taking a decision) is a conscious process; this can be the case but does not have to be.

A prior intention is a mental state that exists at one time, but refers to a later time. For example, Imogene may today have the intention to go to Florence next May. Such a prior intention may never be executed as a matter of fact; for instance, she may change her intention or not succeed in her plan to go to Florence even though she tries to. So a prior intention exists independent of the intended activity.

All in all, then, intentional action presupposes intention qua mental state, and not the other way round (according to Setiya 2018: Section 2, this is now the standard view). But what sort of mental state is intention?

Bratman characterizes intention in terms of the role that it plays in our lives (Bratman 1999: 9 f.). An important part of this role is that intention motivates and guides action (cf. Frankfurt 1978). But this cannot be the whole story, for it is often claimed that desires, too, motivate action. However, as Bratman argues convincingly, intentions and desires should not be confused. First, unlike desires, intentions do not vary in strength: I either have the intention to do X or not. Second, if I intend to do X, I regard it as settled that I will do X (Bratman 1999: 16). I am then committed to doing X (ibid.: 4). The resulting commitment may be based on a prior recognition that X is required, e.g., for moral reasons, but this basis is not necessary for an intention. By contrast, if I merely have a desire to do X, I may not regard it as settled that I will do X because my desire may be outweighed by another stronger desire (ibid.: 15 f.).

If I regard it as settled that I will do X, this will also shape my reasoning and my decisions. I will not decide to do things that render my doing X impossible, given what I believe – or at least, I should not decide this. Rather, on the basis of my intention to do X, I will reason to intentions to take appropriate means – or at least, I should reason in this way. Intentions are, thus, characterized by various dispositions to reason in certain ways and by characteristic norms of rationality. In particular, intentions are subject to demands of consistency and to what Bratman calls "means-ends coherence" (ibid.: 31, 109). Other norms pertain to the reconsideration of intentions (ibid.: Ch. 5).

The role of intentions is very similar to that of plans. For instance, if Imogene plans to go to Florence next May, she takes it as settled that she will go there. She will make sure not to have other plans that are incompatible with going to Florence; and she will eventually choose means that she considers appropriate in order to realize her plan. This, at least, is what she ought to do rationally.

This is why Bratman thinks plans are "intentions writ large" (ibid.: 29). He also claims that most prior intentions are parts of larger plans (ibid.: e.g., 28). The idea here is that plans involve many intentions. For instance, at some point, Imogene will develop a rather concrete plan on how to go to Florence. Her plan may be to take a cab to the station and to take the train at noon on

May 2nd to Florence. These are more specific intentions that are part of the larger plan to go to Florence. Nevertheless, plans are always partial because they leave some things open. At the same time, they have a hierarchical structure: some intentions are subordinate to others because they are supposed to help realize the latter ones (ibid.: 29).

Why are plans and prior intentions so important? Can we not live without them? For Bratman, plans and intentions first help us decouple deliberation and action. We can *now* deliberate what we will do *tomorrow*, *now* form an intention to do this, and *tomorrow* act on this intention. This saves us from having to deliberate at the time of acting. Second, plans and intentions allow for intrapersonal coordination. Suppose, for instance, that Imogene wants to grade essays and cook a meal. If she always follows her strongest desire, there is a danger that she keeps switching back and forth between grading the essays and cooking; and ultimately, neither of the goals are likely to be well achieved. By contrast, if she has a plan to grade the essays first and cook the meal afterwards, both aims can be realized. The fact that she has a plan to cook the meal in a second step settles the case and saves her from continued deliberation on what she should do now. Third, plans and intentions allow for interpersonal coordination since other agents who know that Imogene plans to do X can actually count on her to do X. By contrast, if they had to rely on her desires only, they would not be able to be sure that Imogene would do X (ibid.: 2 f.) because one desire may always be outweighed by a stronger desire.

So plans are important, but as Preston (2013: Ch. 2) warns us, there is a danger of over-stressing its importance. Some things are done spontaneously, i.e., without any prior plan, and yet intentionally and, thus, with an intention. But if intentions are assimilated into plans, then it is natural to think that even spontaneous actions are planned; however, that would be stretching things a bit too much. Most spontaneous actions are unplanned as follows: Neither are they part of larger plans nor are there any prior sub-plans on how to do the thing. Note, though, that this is fully compatible with what has been said before. For instance, to accommodate spontaneous action, we can regard mere intentions to do something (i.e., intentions without more specific plans on how to do it) as limiting cases of plans and allow that such plans or intentions can form almost simultaneously with the action performed. These intentions or plans need then to be distinguished from *prior* plans.

3 Improvisation in the Broad Sense

We now turn to improvisation as a general mode of doing things. (There is not much literature about improvisation in agency; for exceptions, see, e.g., Ryle 1976 and the dissertations by Anderson 1995 and Bagley 2013.) We have to improvise, in this sense, when we want to host friends who have suddenly arrived without having given any prior notice. A chairperson of a panel discussion will improvise if some panelists have not arrived on time. And a teacher has to improvise if she did not prepare for her classes in advance. Here, improvisation is a broad way of acting; very roughly, it is acting without prior plans.

But there is a problem with this idea: It is a matter of degree to what extent our behavior is planned, and most things that we are doing are, to some extent, unplanned – or improvised in this sense (e.g., Alperson 1984: 24; 2014). This is also true for artistic performances: Even performances that clearly do not qualify as improvisation are to some extent, unplanned (e.g., Alperson 1984: 24). But how does this fit together with an on-off notion of improvisation? In the philosophy of art, we need such an on-off notion if we want to say that improvisation is a specific type of performance.

One response to this problem is to concede that improvisation is a matter of degree, or at least of comparison, and to spell out the idea that some agent doing X is more of an improvisation than an agent doing Y. An on-off notion of improvisation can then be obtained by saying that an agent

doing X qualifies as improvising (sans phrase) if, and only if, it was improvised to a greater extent in comparison to a certain standard or point of reference.

While this strategy is, in principle, appropriate, it is not easily carried out. The strategy requires work with artificial and cumbersome formulations such as "an agent's doing X is more improvisatory than the agent's doing Y." Thus, in what follows, I concentrate on a notion of improvisation that is not comparative but can be derived from a comparative one.

To avoid our problem, it is further useful to adjust the analysandum in yet another way. In what follows, improvisation is always assumed to be qualified: The question is not whether, say, Imogene is improvising, but rather whether she is improvising *in doing X*. The qualification "in doing X" is supposed to specify the focus. We cut something out of Imogene's doings and ask whether it is improvised.

How then can we explicate improvisation? Here is my proposal:

An agent is improvising in doing X if, and only if, her doing X is not guided by a comparatively specific prior plan on how to do X.

Let me explain and clarify this proposal with a few comments:

First, the proposal requires that the agent be not guided by a plan on *how to do X* – and not by a plan *to do X* (cf. Preston 2013: 45). Here, plans on how to do X are meant either to further specify X or to specify steps to get X done. For instance, going to Florence is a specification for going to Italy. Thus, intending to go to Florence would already constitute part of a plan on how to go to Italy. A plan on how to go to Italy can also specify what vehicles we take in what order at what time.

In the proposal, it is fully appropriate to exclude only guidance by plans on *how* to do X, but not by a plan or intention to do X. For it is possible to intend to do X and to finally do it in the form of improvising. For instance, Imogene can have a plan to teach a class this morning, but she can teach the class in the mode of improvisation since she did not prepare at all. As we will establish later, we can even plan or intend to do something in the way of improvisation.

Second, according to the proposal, the lack of *existence* of a prior plan is not important, rather, whether the agent is *guided* by such a plan is crucial. This is as it should be. Prior plans on how to X do not compromise Imogene's improvising in doing X, provided she gives up these plans while doing X.

Third, the proposal only excludes guidance by *comparatively specific* plans on how to do X. This is reasonable because the exclusion of *any* plan would restrict the notion of improvisation too much. We have just allowed that an agent who improvises in doing X, may have had a prior intention to do X. Now intentions are easily extended to become more concrete and specific plans. As planning agents, we are continually working on our plans, by specifying them further, changing or adjusting them, and so on. In all this, our planning is part of our activities and intimately entangled with what we are doing. A situation in which an agent has a prior intention to do X, but has not settled any details on how X is done is, thus, peculiar. We cannot expect that improvisation requires this peculiar condition to be fulfilled.

But what exactly is a comparatively specific plan on how to do X? This question requires a *fourth* comment. The specificity of a plan is compared to some standard of reference, for instance, to that of a plan that is typical for the kind of thing being done. This standard will depend on the context or the intention of the speaker who attributes improvisation to an agent (but see below for a qualification). Nevertheless, the clause that the agent is not guided by a fairly specific plan implies that some significant decisions on how to do X are only taken while the activity of doing X unfolds. This implication is needed to exclude potential counterexamples, in which doing X does not require any significant decisions. Suppose, for instance, that Imogene cuts onions without having a prior plan on how to do it. It would seem artificial to say that cutting onions qualifies as improvisation in this example. The reason is that, while cutting onions requires some decisions – e.g., which onion first, etc.– these decisions do not make an interesting difference to

what Imogene is doing or to the outcome, given her skills. Likewise, habitually opening a door does not involve any interesting decision and, thus, does not qualify as improvisation. It is different with the meal: The decisions that Imogene takes while improvising in cooking the meal do make an interesting difference to the outcome, even if parts of cooking itself may be purely habitual. So let us say that, in general, our doing X only qualifies as improvisation if doing X requires significant decisions, i.e., decisions that make an interesting difference to what the agent is doing.

Fifth, my proposal excludes only *prior* plans on how to do X. This allows that the activities constituting X are intentional, i.e., that they are done with an intention. This is as it should be; for instance, if Imogene is improvising in cooking a meal, a huge part of what she does is intentional, e.g., cutting the onions. Her doing this is part of an improvised way of cooking since her intention to cut onions was formed while she was already cooking the meal.

This leads to a question answered in my *sixth* comment: What exactly does it mean for a plan to be "prior"? According to a first answer, a plan is prior if, and only if, it was adopted before the agent has started doing X. This answer is plausible if we concentrate on the idea of improvising *in doing X*, because the beginning of doing X is a natural instance of time to look at. However, the answer has the following consequence: It is compatible with improvisation, if the agent, while doing X, develops a quite specific plan on how to do the remainder of X, and then executes the plan. This consequence might strike us as counter-intuitive. We can avoid this if we look at a second answer to our question of what "prior" means: During improvisation, each significant step should not have been planned before it is started. To exclude guidance by prior plans in this sense in the explication of improvisation implies that improvisation is mainly a spontaneous activity, as defined above: In doing X, the agent carries out most of the significant steps spontaneously or "on the spot." It is difficult to decide between the two answers. While spontaneity is typical of a lot of improvisation, it is not evident that most of the significant steps within improvisation need to be spontaneous (regarding musical improvisation, this point is made by Young and Matheson 2000: 127). Note though that, in practice, both answers often lead to the same attributions of improvisation. Improvisation in the sense of the second answer also qualifies as improvisation following the first answer: If most of the significant steps are spontaneous, the decisions are not taken prior to the start of the performance. Conversely, typical examples of improvisation according to the first answer will also qualify as improvisation according to the second. When we are doing X without being guided by a plan prior to doing it, we do not have much time to plan the remainder of X, so many significant steps will be done spontaneously. In the few cases in which both answers lead to different conclusions, we can try to settle the issue of priority by appealing to the agent's point of view.

As a final comment, it is worthwhile to discuss my proposal in view of a distinction that Goehr (2016) draws between improvisation extempore and impromptu. Goehr's focus is on artistic performance, but the distinction is not restricted to that domain. While improvisation extempore means acting "*from this moment forward*" (459) and, thus, refers to a temporally extended activity, improvisation impromptu captures "what we do at singular moments – in the moment – when we're put on the spot, particularly when we're confronted with an unexpected difficulty or obstacle" (460). It is a spontaneous, surprising turn "when, on the spot, one does (at best) the right or winning thing" (464). While, for example, cooking a lentil soup from this very moment would qualify as improvising in cooking the lentil soup according to my proposal, it is less straightforward how the proposal is related to improvisation impromptu. Certainly, improvising while doing X, as defined above, can involve a lot of improvisation impromptu. It can even be shown that improvisation impromptu is a way of improvising as explicated here. Suppose, for example, that, in a conversation that has become hostile, Imogene suddenly starts to mimic her opponent's voice, while still sticking to her own view, thus making the opponent laugh. Here, the imitation is not guided by a comparatively specific prior plan, so it qualifies as improvisation as explicated here. Arguably, given the way the example is introduced, the question of whether there is a

comparatively specific prior plan does not even arise – it is clear that there is none. For this reason, it is superfluous to stress the improvisatory character of the imitation. But this fact is compatible with it being improvisation.

To sum up, then, my proposal is that an agent's doing X qualifies as improvisation if, and only if, it is not guided by a comparatively specific prior plan on how to do X, where this is meant to imply that some significant decisions on how to do X are not settled by prior plans. To be sure, there are borderline cases in which it is not clear whether a prior plan is comparatively specific and on whether decisions are significant. But this vagueness is not artificially introduced by my explication of improvisation, but, rather, is inherent in our everyday concept of improvisation.

4 The Proposal Applied to Artistic Performance

The proposed account of improvisation (qua general mode of doing things) is easily used to define a notion of artistic improvisation (qua performance). We only need to restrict the proposal to artistic performances or to set the value of the variable X to such performance. Accordingly, improvisation is a performance that qualifies as improvisation in the broad sense. This is to say that, in giving the performance, the artist is not guided by a comparatively specific prior plan on how to give the performance, with the implication that giving the performance requires significant decisions. This is compatible with the performer following certain rules, e.g., for the harmonic structure, if the rules leave enough space for significant decisions to be made. An artist is improvising sans phrase if, and only if, she gives a performance that qualifies as improvisation.

Does this yield an appropriate notion of artistic improvisation? To answer this question, I will test the proposed definition of improvisation using several examples taken from music.

Assume first that a soloist performs a known work of music, say, one of Bach's solo partitas. This is not an improvisation and does not qualify as such under my definition because there is a specific prior plan on how to give the performance. A crucial part of this plan is to perform Bach's partita; doing this is, in fact, much more specific than just giving a performance, and it involves doing many particular things, e.g., playing the notes that are specified in the score. The prior plan of the violinist may be even more specific than just playing Bach's partita; for instance, she may be guided by the intention to play it in a particular way – say, very slowly.

If the violinist has not decided on her interpretation of the piece beforehand or if her performance of the partita is highly shaped by spontaneous decisions, there are certainly aspects of the performance that are improvised, and we can say that she is improvising in the broad sense. More precisely, she is improvising *in interpreting Bach's partita*. However, according to my definition, the performance does not properly qualify as artistic improvisation. The reason is that the performance is still guided by a comparatively specific prior plan (including the intention to play Bach's partita), and according to my definition, the decisive question is whether the agent is improvising *in giving her performance* and not in interpreting Bach's partita. This result is as it should be because, intuitively, we would not speak of an improvisation if an agent has not decided on the interpretation beforehand (cf. Kania 2011: 395).

Some musical works allow, or require, the performer to improvise to some extent. Consider, first, the case of a violin concerto in which the cadenza may be improvised by the soloist (here I am abstracting from the fact that the concerto is not performed by one single musician). On the basis of my definition, we can say that the cadenza qualifies as improvisation if we consider it a little performance of its own. Nevertheless, playing the whole concerto is not improvisation per my definition, because, if we focus on the larger unit, there is a comparatively specific prior plan, viz. to play what is written in the score. This, again, is a very plausible result.

Let us now turn to musical works that generally afford more freedom to the interpreter, e.g., if the basso continuo is not fully specified in baroque music, and the interpreter is expected to fill in

the details. But the performance would not qualify as improvisation under the proposed definition, simply because the musical work still specifies a comparatively specific plan for the performance. This seems correct, so my definition is, once more, in accordance with what we would say pre-theoretically. Using our comparative notion of improvisation in the broad sense, we can additionally say that an interpreter is improvising more in Baroque music than in, say, Romantic music.

Consider now a scenario in which a violinist starts with interpreting a musical work. Unfortunately, shortly after she commences, two strings break, one after the other, making it impossible to perform the musical work. Still, the violinist believes she has to go on and starts improvising by drawing on the work and swinging through those parts of the work she can still play (the example is adapted from Goehr's description of the movie *Broken Strings* [Goehr 2016: 476]). Assuming that the performance does not qualify as a performance of the original work, we can clearly note improvisation here according to my proposal, at least for the part after the strings have broken, but also – with a grain of salt – for the whole performance, simply because it was not guided by a comparatively specific prior plan. What is special here is that the improvisation was not planned beforehand; rather, the agent decided spontaneously to continue the performance using improvisation. Note also that her decision to swing through the remainder is what Goehr calls "impromptu improvisation" (otherwise, we need not discuss improvisation impromptu here since it does not qualify as a kind of performance).

But what if a violinist plays a musical work, but has not decided beforehand which musical work to perform? In a surprise concert, she may spontaneously decide which musical work she is performing. Intuitively, the resulting performance does not count as improvisation, and an audience wouldn't take it as such. Per my definition, things are a bit more complicated because the issue of what "prior" is has not been settled definitively. If prior plans are those that have been adopted before the beginning of the performance, then the question of whether we are dealing with an improvisation depends on whether the decision itself counts as part of the performance or not. It is plausible to say that it does not, because the agent has to know which note to play before beginning to perform a musical work, so my definition matches intuition once more. But we can think of an example in which the soloist first plays a note and then decides to continue with a musical work that begins with this note. In this very special example, the performance begins without a prior plan and the performance as a whole would qualify as improvisation if priority is conceptualized as indicated. This is not the result that we would find correct intuitively. But at this point, we can appeal to the other idea of priority, viz. priority with respect to the things played during the performance. If this sense of priority is chosen, then the performance clearly does not qualify as improvisation, because, shortly after the beginning, the very detailed plan adopted for the remainder of the performance excludes much spontaneity.

All in all, then, our proposal most often reproduces pre-theoretical intuition about the cases. But the objection may be put forth that this is only so since we have related specific prior plans to musical works as follows: Whenever an agent is performing a musical work, then her performance is planned to a degree that is incompatible with improvisation. Is there sufficient justification to adopt this assumption?

To some extent, the assumption is justified because musical works provide salient and readily available content for very specific plans. So it is plausible to treat them as clear-cut examples that do not qualify as improvisation. Given that improvisation is, at its heart, a matter of degree, it is also useful if a community of speakers settles on some clear-cut examples of improvisation and non-improvisation; otherwise, it is too difficult to know what improvisation means in the context of specific examples. Thus, a convention could arise wherein performances of musical works do not qualify as improvisation. If there is such a convention, then our assumption is clearly justified.

For a further discussion of my definition, let us now compare it to other full-fledged analyses or explications of improvisation.

Young and Matheson (2000) focus on music and propose that "an improvised performance is one in which the structural properties of performance are not completely determined by decisions made prior to the time of performance" (127). Here, the structural properties of performance are meant to cover "melody, harmony, and length (in bars, not in temporal duration)" and are contrasted to expressive ones, including tempo and dynamics (ibid.).

This definition is a further specification of my definition. It arises if, in my proposal, we settle on priority with respect to the starting point of the performance. Further, in my proposal, the specificity of plans needs to be understood along the distinction between structural and expressive properties so that a plan is not thought to be too specific for improvisation if it leaves at least some structural properties open.

However, the greater specificity of Young and Matheson's proposal is problematic. The problem is not, as Kania (2011: 395) thinks, that the proposal does not allow one to improvise the dynamics of a musical work. We can say that the dynamics are improvised without saying that the performance is an improvisation, and Young and Matheson's account is only supposed to explicate improvisation qua performance. The problem with their proposal is, rather, that performances in which some structural properties are not planned need not be improvisations. As mentioned before, in a violin concerto, the cadenza may be improvised, and this means that some structural properties, e.g., melody and harmony, are improvised. But this does not make the performance of the whole work (or a movement of it) an improvisation.

In more general terms, the problem with Young and Matheson's proposal is that it is based upon a rather strict distinction between those aspects of performance that need to be unplanned in improvisation and those that do not. This problem can be avoided by refraining from such a strict distinction. For instance, Kania (2011: 395) takes improvisation to be "*a performance event guided by decisions about that event made by the performer shortly before the event takes place*."

The problem with this account is that the interpretation of a musical work too can be guided by decisions that are taken shortly before the interpretation takes place. For instance, an interpreter may only decide "on the spot" how fast she plays a certain piece. So Kania does not just refrain from suggesting a strict distinction about what may and may not be planned prior to the performance in improvisation; rather, he loses sight of the fact that some aspects of improvisation may be planned, while others may not be. My definition, by contrast, is ultimately based upon the recognition that planning is a matter of degree and that only some degree of a lack of plans is required for improvisation.

Apart from this, it is unclear how exactly Kania's definition is meant to work. If "performance event" is supposed to cover the whole performance, then the definition seems wrong, because it yields the incorrect result for the surprise performance of a musical work, where the musician decides shortly before the performance what she will play. According to Kania's definition, this would qualify as an improvisation, which seems inaccurate. By contrast, if the definition is supposed to specify how the parts of an improvisation are performed (so performance events are parts of an improvisation; see Kania 2011: 401 f., fn. 26), it would imply that each part of the performance is more or less played spontaneously, which seems too strong a statement to make. My own account leaves open the possibility that significant parts of the performance are guided by a fairly specific plan if the latter was developed during the performance. All in all, then, my definition seems to be more adequate than the two proposals.

5 The Puzzle Resolved

An important consequence of my definition is that an agent can intentionally improvise. This is true both of improvisation in the broad sense and of artistic improvisation. In what follows, I will concentrate on the latter.

To say that an agent improvises intentionally is to say that she either intends to improvise or intends to do something by improvising. A very perspicuous way of intending to improvise is to have the prior intention to improvise in a performance. This is possible as follows: An artist has a prior intention of giving a performance. We have already noted that this is compatible with having no plan on *how* to give the performance and, thus, with improvising in giving the performance. Further, the artist has the prior intention of performing in a way that is not guided by fairly specific prior plans and, thus, has a prior intention to improvise. An agent can intend this by having decided to give the performance, but intentionally not adopting any sufficiently specific plan on *how* to give the performance itself. For instance, the artist may have committed to engaging in free jazz improvisation (see Young and Matheson 2000: 131 f.; Kania 2011: 393). This commitment may even be public in an announcement to improvise in this way (and if the artist does not do so in the performance, but rather improvises following a certain harmonic structure, then the audience can rightly complain that it was deceived). So, altogether, we have constructed a case in which an artist is improvising intentionally due to a prior intention. In a similar way, we can construct examples in which an artist is improvising intentionally because she has the intention to do something *by* improvising.

Note, however, that improvisation is also possible without any prior plan to improvise. In the broad sense, an agent improvises spontaneously if she suddenly realizes that her plans on how to do X cannot be executed and thus does X differently or does something else. This qualifies as improvisation impromptu, at least if it is a clever turn. It can also happen in a musical performance (be it of a musical work or an improvisation). As the swing example from *Broken Strings* shows, it even turns the performance of a work into improvisation.

That improvisation can be intentional has important consequences for the third-person attribution of improvisation. For example, suppose an artist is intentionally improvising. This implies that she is improvising in her own view, according to her own standards. Now if another person, a speaker, wonders whether the artist is improvising according to my definition, she has to decide whether there was a comparatively detailed prior plan, and this requires a standard of comparison. But if the speaker has reason to think that the artist is improvising intentionally and, thus, according to her own view, it is very natural to adopt the artist's standpoint and to say that the agent is improvising. It would, in fact, be misleading not to do so and to say that an artist does not improvise if she does so according to her own standards, or the other way round. So whenever intentional improvisation is assumed, attributions of improvisation will naturally appeal to the agent's standards. This observation can be brought to bear on the example with the surprise piece. If the artist herself does not consider herself to be improvising in the example, then it is natural to say that she does not improvise.

It may be objected that this implies an unacceptably subjectivist take on improvisation. But this objection is not well founded. First, the speaker's appeal to the agent's point of view tends to produce an intersubjective agreement between both parties. Second, the speaker need not follow the agent's point of view. For instance, if the speaker thinks that the agent's standards for comparatively specific plans are inappropriate, she can say that the agent does not improvise although she believes herself to be doing so.

We now have the resources to solve the puzzle mentioned at the beginning of this chapter. The puzzle arose from the observation that improvisation is intentional, yet unplanned. We have now seen that improvisation as a whole can be intentional and, thus, planned. Indeed, improvisation qua performance is most often intentional. For instance, when we talk about a public performance, then it has typically been announced as improvisation and, for an artist, it is barely possible to improvise without having had a prior plan to do so. At the same, there is no specific prior plan on how to give the performance, so most of what is done during the improvisation is not planned ahead. What is crucial here is the distinction between the improvisation as a whole and what is

done during the improvisation. While the former is typically intended and planned, this does not imply that the details are planned or intended ahead of time. Doing X may be the content of a prior intention, but doing certain parts in specific ways may not be intended prior to doing X. And it may be intended beforehand to leave certain decisions about the details open. Indeed, the prior intention to improvise presupposes that we can do things without prior intention.

This solution to the puzzle is clearly within the confines of the mainstream philosophy of action. The concepts I introduced in Section 2 were sufficient to define improvisation – both in its general sense and as artistic improvisation. Nevertheless, some authors, e.g., Preston (2013: Ch. 2) and Angelino (2019), think that improvisation escapes the mainstream philosophy of action. Let us, thus, critically examine what they have to say. I should add that both Preston (2013) and Angelino (2019) do not focus on improvisation qua performance; rather, they concentrate on improvisation in artistic production. But at least Angelino draws on an example from improvisatory performances and argues that this is legitimate due to similarities between improvisation in composition and improvised performances of music (ibid.: 206). It is, thus, legitimate to discuss at least her view in our context. What I say in response to her is in accordance with Bertinetto (2015), who stresses the intentional character of improvisation too.

According to Angelino, "[T]here is really no conceptually coherent way of talking about such phenomenon [improvisation or a certain pattern inherent in it] in the context of planning theories of action" (ibid.: 205; cf. Preston 2013: 44). More specifically, following Preston, Angelino thinks that improvisation is intentional, but only due to "non-plan-based ways of structuring extended sequences of actions" that are supposed to escape the mainstream philosophy of action (ibid.: 205). Now the mainstream philosophy of action can certainly account for non-plan-based sequences of actions. For instance, it can say that every action in the sequence is done spontaneously, with no prior intention. But for Angelino, this is not sufficient because,

> The problem improvisation (improvisatory action) poses for action theory is that, from a planning perspective, such sequences of coordinated actions are effectively invisible as extended, structured wholes. Rather, the actions that make such sequences are analyzable only as separate actions, each of which is driven, on most accounts, by a separate, rapidly formed planful intention. The main difficulty is thus that action theory does not have any conceptual ways or means of identifying or explaining the overall structure of extended activity that it is not specified in advance in a plan.
>
> *(Angelino 2019: 212 – a very similar point was before made by Preston 2013: 54 f.)*

Angelino's key question to the mainstream philosophy of action, thus, is how an improvisation as an extended performance can have structure. I do not think that the mainstream philosophy of action flounders if it tries to answer this question.

Note, first, that a non-trivial structure is not strictly necessary for improvisation. It may well be that an improvisation is not structured in any interesting way. Consequently, an explanation of how an interesting structure may arise during improvisation should not be absorbed into the definition itself. Thus, structure does not pose an interesting problem, at least for the very definition of improvisation.

Second, structure can arise unintentionally. For instance, a certain improvisation may coincidentally have a three-part structure, because there are three stages of improvisation that are saliently different. Nothing in the mainstream philosophy of action precludes this, and that the structure has not been created intentionally is also compatible with the improvisation as such being intentional.

Third, and more importantly, structure in an extended sequence of episodes or action can also arise intentionally without prior plan in a way that can be described in terms of the mainstream

philosophy of action. For instance, after some part of the improvisation, the agent can decide to continue in some way that is markedly different from the previous improvisation. To provide a very simple example, the artist may note that she has so far played in a slow and melodic way, and she may then decide to finish this way of playing and to contrast what can now be called the first part with an episode that is faster and consists of very short staccato phrases. Or after having played a while, the artist may decide to finish after rounding up her improvisation by playing an episode that is close to what she can remember from the very beginning of her improvisation. In this way, we obtain a structure that was not planned ahead, but that is intentional because it is based on decisions the artist has made during the improvisation. It is true that these ways of imposing structure while playing are not a prominent theme in the mainstream philosophy of action, but the latter clearly has the resources to accommodate and describe such structuring.

But what are the theoretical alternatives that Angelino suggests for our understanding of improvisation? The key ideas can be subsumed under the labels "dynamic schema," "emergence in time," and "motor intentionality." Dynamic schema is characterized as schematic representation, as affordance, but also as a sort of know-how (ibid.: 214). The crucial idea seems to be that a schematic representation becomes filled with content (ibid.: 213). In the mainstream philosophy of action, this can be captured as the specification of plans or intentions: As we go along, our plans become increasingly concrete and filled with more and more details. It is, of course, an interesting question of how this specification is achieved, and the mainstream philosophy of action as such does not have much to say about this (but see Richardson 1994). The ideas that Angelino appeals to may provide a more informative account of what is going on here, but we are clearly not talking about something that is incompatible with what has been said on action so far.

Second, there is the "intrinsically and characteristically temporal character of improvisation" (ibid.: 215). For Angelino, improvisation is characterized as "a continuous reshaping of emerging intentions *over time*" (217, her emphasis). But nobody would deny that agency, in general, and improvisation, more specifically, have an interesting structure in time. Regarding the former, Bratman stresses that intentions and plans are subject to change, for instance, since they can be further specified or revised. Regarding improvisation, my definition requires that new intentions on how to play arise during the performance, and one way this may happen is that intentions are either spontaneously formed or further reshaped – and thus created in the way of improvisation, if you want. So, Angelino's second point does not add anything new to our understanding of improvisation.

Third, there is motor intentionality. If I understand it correctly, the main idea is that a number of possibilities created by the body are tried and then the most fitting option is selected (ibid.: 220); Preston (2013: 104) calls this "proliferate-and-select strategy." While this type of process is clearly part of composing a musical work, it is not characteristic of improvisation qua performance and, thus, not relevant for the purposes of this chapter simply because, in performance, there is no way of selecting among possibilities that have been tried. An analogous point can be made about Preston's "appropriate-and-extend strategy" (96, emphasis deleted: C. B.). Her "turn-taking strategy" (96, emphasis deleted: C. B.) applies only to collective improvisation and thus is beyond the scope of this chapter.

In sum, then, what Angelino has on offer for the description of improvisatory performances can, to a large part, be re-conceptualized in the mainstream philosophy of action. True, based on the testimony from artists, Angelino gives rich and intriguing descriptions of what happens during improvisation. In particular, she is correct that the body plays an important role. But all this is compatible with the mainstream philosophy of action. The latter allows for spontaneous action not due to prior plans, and this very possibility opens the space for the emergence of interesting activities that are not planned ahead. One problem is, admittedly, that a lot of the mainstream philosophy of action do not have much to say about spontaneous action (although the latter is part

of the controversy between J. McDowell and H. Dreyfus, see Dreyfus 2005; 2007; McDowell 2007; Rietveld 2010; Gottlieb 2011; Bermúdez 2017). So what Preston and Angelino have on offer helps fill this gap. The authors are also correct in observing that the focus of much of the philosophy of action has been on planning, and maybe the case for planning and its rationality has been overstated. In this sense, an examination of improvisation is useful to get the larger picture of human action right.

6 Conclusions

The way in which improvisation is intentional may seem puzzling. On the one hand, the improvisation as such is typically intended and may even be part of a larger plan. But on the other hand, it is crucial for improvisation not to be planned. This puzzle is not just important for artistic improvisation but also besets improvisation as a broad way of acting.

In this chapter, I have proposed to resolve the puzzle by drawing on resources from the mainstream philosophy of action. The resolution is straightforward and hinges on a more precise analysis of the contents of various intentions and plans that are involved in improvisation. While there is typically a general intention to improvise, more specific intentions and plans of what to do during the improvisation are lacking. To describe this structure in more detail, I put forth a definition of improvisation. According to my general proposal, an agent is improvising in doing X if, and only if, her doing X is not guided by comparatively specific prior plans on how to do X. An artistic improvisation is a performance that qualifies as improvisation in the broad sense.

Note that the proposed account of artistic improvisation does not assume a specific ontology of works of art, e.g., of musical works (see Davis 2001 and Dodd 2007 for important monographs and Kania 2008 for an overview). Works are important to the account because they provide a salient type of content for plans that are too specific for artistic improvisation. But this does not imply that musical works are types of actions. What is only needed is that the intention to perform a particular work counts as a very specific plan. This is also the case if, e.g., a musical work is a type of sound structure (e.g., Dodd 2007). The intention to play the work, then, is the intention to produce a series of sounds that instantiate the work, and this qualifies as a plan that settles a lot of details.

This chapter has focused on improvisation by one single agent. The account can easily be generalized to collective improvisation if there are collective intentions. The idea would be that collective improvisation excludes too-specific prior collective intentions. But it is controversial whether there are such intentions and what exactly they are (see, e.g., Bratman 1993). So more work is needed to investigate collective improvisation in line with the strategy outlined in this chapter (see also Angelino 2020a and 2020b for collective improvisation). I will leave this for further work. Otherwise, I would have to improvise too much.[1]

Note

1 I am extremely grateful to the editors for detailed constructive comments on an earlier version of this chapter and for their patience.

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8

IMPROVISATION, ACTIONS, AND PROCESSES

Pierre Saint-Germier and Clément Canonne

> In the purest sense, I have created the lack of an object. You hear the process and if you can't get into the process, it's nothing.
>
> *(Keith Jarrett)*

1 Introduction

It is often noted that the word "improvisation" displays a product/process ambiguity typical of nominalizations of action verbs: sometimes by "improvisation" we refer to the *process* or *activity* of improvising something (a piece of music, a choreography, a poem, a story, a theater play, etc.), sometimes we refer to the *product* of this activity (Alperson 1984, 2010). On the basis of this distinction, a number of claims have been made regarding the ontology and aesthetics of improvisation in the arts. The artistic *products* resulting from improvised performances are indeed often envisioned as sharing the same ontological category as the products of their "scripted," pre-composed counterparts. For instance, in the musical case, Alperson holds that the product of an improvisation is a "sequential structure of sounds" (1984: 21). Based on the further observation that improvised sound structures are generally less sophisticated and less rewarding as foci of appreciation than the structures of musical works from the common practice period, Alperson suggests that the aesthetic merits we attach to improvisations do not belong to the product but really to the process itself, identified with the skillful activity of the improviser:

> […] more confronts us in a musical improvisation than a coherent structure of sound. A musical improvisation is also an action, a fact which is reflected in the ambiguity of the term "improvisation" noted earlier: an improvisation may be something made or it may be something done. In the latter sense, the action of creating a musical work as it is being performed becomes an object of contemplation. We are thus driven back in our examination of the product of musical improvisation to features of the activity of musical improvisation.
>
> *(Alperson 1984: 23 f.)*

Let us call the claim being made here "Alperson's Thesis" (AT). We take it as the conjunction of the two following propositions:[1]

(AT1) The activity of improvisation, rather than its product, are the bearers of the aesthetic merits of musical improvisations.

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(AT2) The proper focus of appreciation of improvised music is the activity of improvising music, rather than its product.

This claim of Alperson's has been widely endorsed by philosophers of art concerned with improvisation. Lee B. Brown praises Alperson for his "recognition of the centrality of activity in improvisational music" (1996: 357) and unambiguously reduces musical improvisations to actions: "improvisations *are* transient processes. Indeed, they are *actions*" (ibid., emphasis in the original text). David Davies incorporates AT into his analysis of Keith Jarrett's *Köln Concert* as an artwork, where

> Jarrett's actions on stage on January 24, 1975 must be the work's artistic vehicle, and these actions must have been executed with the intention of articulating an artistic content accessible only to receivers who accord that vehicle the distinctive kind of regard for which artworks call.
>
> *(Davies 2011: 142)*

The same reasoning can obviously be applied, *mutatis mutandis*, to other forms of improvised performing arts. Sequences of words and actions resulting from improvised theater can be seen as lacking the tightness and consistency found in many scripted plays, with their well-oiled dramatic machinery, in which every bit of intrigue seems to neatly fall into place. Similarly, the sequences of gestures and motions resulting from improvised dance can be noted as lacking the bird's eye view and well-balanced spatial organization that characterize fully written-out choreographies. In all those cases, the structural imperfections of the resulting "objects" have been pointed out in order to ground the idea that appreciating improvised arts is mainly a matter of following the improvisers' actions and thought processes rather than paying close attention to such actions' and thought processes' total outputs, envisioned as, for instance, sound-structures, words/actions-structures, or gestures/motions-structures.

There is no doubt some truth in this way of describing the specific kind of aesthetic appreciation that improvisation invites and requires, as testified to by recent empirical work on the listening of collective musical improvisation (Canonne 2018). This being said, we find AT as a general thesis problematic in a number of ways, at the level of its content as well as at the level of its motivation and defense. In this paper, we would like to challenge AT and provide an alternative view of the aesthetic merits of improvisation, according to which they attach to the improvised product itself at least as much as to the underlying human activity. It should be noted that our primary aim here is to provide a descriptively adequate account of the merits and appreciative focus of improvised music, rather than to identify what makes improvised music aesthetically distinct from non-improvised music. We do not want to deny that some aesthetic properties may be specific to improvised music as such. What we do want to deny, however, is that the central aesthetic properties that we value in improvised music, whether or not they are specific to it, always attach primarily to actions as opposed to their products, as AT claims they do.

After clarifying AT (§ 2), we reconstruct the main argument in its favor (§ 3). We then offer two arguments for rejecting AT, each one leading to an alternate suggestion on how to frame the products of improvisational activities as concrete occurrences, namely as instantiations of sequential structures of sounds (§ 4) and as pure processes (§ 5), showing each time that those sonic occurrences (vs. the underlying activity) can also be the primary bearers of the aesthetic merits of improvisation. We then clarify the perspectival nature of the difference between the two ontologies and show how a process perspective can illuminate the aesthetic merits of a large number of improvisational products (§ 6). We conclude with a discussion of possible extensions of the resulting framework to other performing arts (§ 7).

2 Alperson's Thesis

Let us start by considering in more detail the content of AT and explain why we find it problematic. An immediate consequence of AT is that *musical sounds* cease to be the *primary* subject of significant aesthetic qualities, and the object of the proper appreciation of improvised music. AT, of course, does not imply that we should appreciate the actions of improvisers *in abstraction* from the sounds generated, which would be way too strong to be plausible.[2] In improvised musical performances, as in musical performances generally, the actions of the performers are closely connected, both causally and intentionally to the qualities of the sounds produced, so that it seems even impossible to consider actions separately from the sound. Still, the distinctive bite of AT is to confer a *priority* to actions (vs. sounds) in the emergence of the distinctive aesthetic qualities of the music and, relatedly, a priority to actions (vs. sounds) as objects of aesthetic appreciation.

AT should *not* be understood as a particular instance of a general action-type (Currie 1989) or a performance ontology of art (Davies 2004) according to which artworks in general should be construed in the first place as creative actions of performances, rather than as concrete or abstract objects like paintings, sculptures, sequential structures sounds, sequences of words, etc. AT is meant to establish a contrast among musical improvisations and musical works: while the most significant aesthetic merits of (classical) musical works attach to the products of compositional activity, no comparably significant merits attach to the products of musical improvisational activity; rather, they attach to the activity itself. So AT can be taken as asserting a fundamental asymmetry between musical works and musical improvisations when it comes to the repartition of aesthetic merits and proper focus of appreciation between creative processes and products.

But is this asymmetry so clear? On the one hand, some aesthetic merits of musical works are obviously ascribed to the generative activity of the composer, as opposed to its material result, for example the cleverness of the superposition of the three subjects in Bach's Fugue in C# minor from the first book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier.*[3] On the other hand, it is no less clear that some distinctive aesthetic merits of improvised musical pieces attach to the music itself, rather than to the underlying generative actions. Consider for example the *elating* and *uplifting* qualities often associated with hard driving jazz (e.g., John Coltrane's classic quartet), or the characteristic *fragility* of some chamber-music-like abstract free improvisations (e.g., The Contest of Pleasures trio with John Butcher, Xavier Charles, and Axel Dörner), expressing a sense that the music remains poised on a knife edge, risking collapse, but maintaining itself, nonetheless. The asymmetry entailed by AT thus needs a strong defense; so let us now turn to the argument offered by Alperson.

3 The Argument For AT

The main argument offered by Alperson in support of AT is an argument by elimination. It can be reconstructed from the following premises:

P1 The word "improvisation" can refer either to the process of improvising something (i.e., the process-improvisation) or to the thing improvised (the product-improvisation).[4]
P2 Product-improvisations cannot be the bearers of the aesthetic merits of musical improvisations nor the primary focus of the appreciation of improvised music.
P3 Process-improvisations are activities.

Then AT1 and AT2 follow by elimination.

Let us start with P1. This is a widely held view about nominalizations according to which nominalizations are structurally ambiguous in that they may equally refer to processes or to the products of those processes.[5] For example, by "construction" we may refer either to the process by

which a building came to be erected, or to the erected building itself. The ontological difference between those two referents is hard to overstate: the former is an occurrent entity that takes time whereas the latter is a continuant entity that endures through time. The notion of a temporal part clearly makes sense for the former, while it is controversial (to say the least) for the latter.

There is little doubt that the noun "improvisation" instantiates the same ambiguity. There is rather clear linguistic evidence in favor of the ambiguity thesis about "improvisation." Consider:

(1) Tommy did not enjoy his improvisation on *Giant Steps*.

This sentence can be understood as meaning either of the two following sentences:

(1a) Tommy did not enjoy improvising on *Giant Steps* (because he struggled with the chord changes).

Or:

(1b) Tommy did not like the result of his improvisation on Giant Steps (because it is full of broken lines and fragmentary motives).

Since "improvisation" is the nominalization of an action verb, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that process-improvisations are activities, so that there is little doubt about P3. However, the nature of the entity referred to on the product reading is not exactly clear.

It should be noted, before addressing this issue, that the ontological category of the entities referred to by nominalizations on their product reading does not, in general, have to be an enduring entity, as the example of "construction" may have suggested. Consider for example the case of Alice who, after a long and painful time of mourning, finally accepts that she will have to live the rest of her life without her recently deceased husband Bob. When Alice's friend Cathy says that Alice's acceptance of her new life was difficult, she is referring to the *process* that lead to her accepting the loss of her husband. But when Cathy congratulates Alice for accepting her new situation, she is not referring to the extended process Alice went through, but rather to its end product, the state of acceptance that she finally reached. It is clear that this state of acceptance is an occurrent entity, rather than a continuant one, unlike the product of a construction process.

Coming back to the case of musical improvisation, Alperson assumes that product-improvisations, at least in the familiar domain of jazz music, are "sequential structures of sounds" (1984: 21), SSSs for short. While he does not say much about his view of SSSs, he seems to take them as objects of the same ontological category as musical works. For he takes their "design" to be an object of attention (21), and views them as bearers of properties such as "formal unity" (21) and of "regional qualities which we would hope to find in any conventional musical work," such as "intelligible development, internal unity, coherence, originality, ingenuity, etc., the artful employment of prevailing idioms and the emergence of an individual style" (22).

This identification of product-improvisations with SSSs is crucial to the justification of P2. For P2 is based on the empirical fact that the aesthetic merit of musical improvisations, especially in jazz where Alperson situates most of his examples, typically does not match the aesthetic merit of their SSSs. This fact – which is hardly disputable and can be backed by numerous additional examples – leads, however, to P2 only if one reduces product-improvisations to SSSs. If there is more to product-improvisations than an SSS, the above mentioned empirical fact is powerless to establish P2, for that non-structural aspects of product-improvisations could be the bearer of the aesthetic merit that the SSS lacks.

The reduction of product-improvisations to SSSs is also crucial for the justification of AT itself, for the argument backing AT is an argument by elimination. The reason why Alperson turns away from the product and towards the process is that the aesthetic merit of improvisation has to have a bearer. And if that cannot be an SSS, then it cannot be a product-improvisation and so it has to be an activity.

Thus, in order to fully evaluate Alperson's argument for AT, we need to look deeper at the relationship between product-improvisations and SSSs.

4 Product-Improvisations as Instantiations of Sequential Sound Structures

Is it so clear that the product of the activity of improvising a chorus, say, is an SSS? When one considers without any prejudice or hidden theoretical agenda what is produced by an activity of musical improvisation, the plain answer seems to be that what is produced is a temporally extended complex of musical sounds. From an ontological point of view, this seems to be a concrete occurrent entity, rather than an abstract continuant. Taken literally, the reduction of product-improvisations to SSSs as suggested by Alperson seems to encounter serious difficulties. It is indeed well-known that construing improvisations as abstract continuant entities of the sort that Platonists want to identify works of music with raises a number of difficulties (Brown 1996). In particular, it is not clear why product-improvisations should be identified with multiple eternal instantiable abstract entities when they are so obviously tied to the creative actions of the performers, and are intended to be played only once – *here* and *now* (Bertinetto 2012).

A more charitable reading of Alperson's view is, however, possible. At some point in his 1984 paper, Alperson switches from "sequence of sound structure" to "sounding structure"; this suggests that he may have intended to identify product-improvisations with SSSs-instantiations rather than with SSSs themselves. The SSS-instantiation view of product-improvisations unambiguously construes them as occurrent entities, in agreement with common sense.[6] It is important to make clear from the outset that *instantiating* an *SSS* is not meant to be an action, but rather an occurrence that happens in a temporally extended complex of sounds. In improvisation, SSS-instantiations are causally related to actions of the musicians, but this is a contingent feature of this particular sort of SSS-instantiations. Natural or mechanical processes in our environment can also instantiate SSSs without any agency being involved. So the analysis of product-improvisations as occurrent entities does not necessarily entail a collapse with process-improvisations.

Now if product-improvisations are identified with SSS-instantiations, then Alperson's argument-by-elimination can perhaps be made to work after all. For then the *primary* way for those product-improvisations to receive their distinctive aesthetic merit, is via the instantiation of their associated SSSs. Since we know they do not get all their merit in this way, we have to conclude that this merit really attaches to something else, which can only be process-improvisations.

This version of AT faces a serious problem, however. It is well known that the aesthetic merit of the performance of an SSS does not necessarily match the aesthetic merit that attaches to that SSS alone. This is a consequence of the fact that performances add a considerable amount of information to the SSSs they instantiate. It is then possible that some distinctive aesthetic merits emerge only when the SSS is performed. For example, while unimaginative performances of the first movement of Schumann's String Quartet in A major Op. 41 n°3 typically bring to the fore its "lack of thematic and tonal contrast" (Lester 1995: 214), other performers, such as the Quartetto Italiano in a 1972 recording, "produce an evolving thematic and tonal design" (ibid.) that seems miles away from the "clumsiness" of Schumann's sonata form.

If the sonic realization of an SSS can bring new aesthetic merits compared to the ones that attach primarily to the SSS itself, then it is not enough that an SSS has a low aesthetic merit for the temporally extended complex of sounds instantiating it to have low aesthetic merit too. In particular, the fact that the SSS of an improvisation is not very satisfying, especially when judged against criteria relevant to composed classical music, does not mean that they cannot compensate for this lack of merit at the level of SSS through additional aesthetic merits grounded in the very way this SSS unfolds through time. Consider for example, Miles Davis' famous trumpet solo on the first

chorus of *So What* (*Kind of Blue*, Columbia, 1959). This chorus possesses qualities of plasticity and elastic relaxation, enabled by Davis' precise rhythmic positioning, his use of subtle microtonal variations in the attack of crucial notes, within a dominantly sparse discourse. Those qualities, which are essential to the aesthetic value of this particular chorus, clearly do not supervene on the SSS one may find in a typical transcription of Davis' solo. Evidence of this may be found in the performance of such a transcription by George Russell's Living Time Orchestra (*So what*, Blue note, 1986), which preserves the general melodic and rhythmic shape of Davis' chorus, but not the aforementioned qualities. Yet it would seem strange, and *prima facie* unmotivated, to insist that those qualities in Davis' original solo improvisation really attach to his improvised actions rather than to the sound it produces. Of course, an analogous sort of relaxation, plasticity, and elasticity is plausibly co-instantiated in Davis' actions, e.g., in the muscular activity of his respiratory system and of his fingers, but it is clear that the qualities referred to here are realized in sound rather than in behavior.

An analogy might help clarify this point. In his liner notes to *Kind of Blue*, Bill Evans famously compares jazz improvisation to "a Japanese visual art in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous." While it is clear that the aesthetic qualities of the painting are at least causally dependent, and perhaps constitutively dependent on the spontaneity of the painters' movements, it no less clear that the resulting aesthetic qualities are attached to the painting itself rather than to the action that generated it. When we praise the sense of sparseness, elegance, and relaxation of such paintings, these aesthetic qualities are visually realized in the painting itself, not in the painter's activity, however dependent the former is on the latter. Analogously, the fact that the sonically realized aesthetic qualities of Davis' chorus depend at least causally, and perhaps constitutively, on corresponding qualities in his actions, does not imply that those aesthetic properties primarily attach to the underlying activity, rather than to the actual stream of sounds he produces.

It could be objected that those aesthetic qualities are only contingently attached to the music qua *improvised* music. It seems, in principle, possible to duplicate those qualities without improvising at all. There is in fact a real-life instance of such a possibility, namely the conceptual album *Blue*, published for the HotCup Records label in 2014, recorded by the postmodernist ensemble Mostly Other People Do the Killing, where a jazz quintet provides a note-for-note reenactment of the classic Miles Davis album. In virtue a remarkable instrumental mastery, the trumpet player Peter Evans comes as close as humanly possible to the duplication of the qualities referred to above. The question, now, is whether those considerations should force us to exclude those qualities from the proper appreciation focus of Miles Davis' music, since they can also be found in a non-improvised rendition. There are a number of reasons, however, for resisting this conclusion. First, it is clear that such an exclusion would be at least descriptively inadequate. We take as fact – when it comes to the appreciation of Miles Davis' music, and of jazz music generally – that those qualities, and similar ones, are part of the central focus of appreciation (which does not mean of course that they exhaust that focus). Second, the view that *only* the qualities that necessarily attach to improvisation as such can be at the center of the appreciation of improvised music would require a strong motivation. Relying on pairs of indiscernible performances, such as *Kind of Blue* vs. *Blue*, to reveal aesthetic specificities of improvised music, obviously begs the question, since by assumption no difference can come from the perceptible qualities of the product, but only from the causal and intentional features of the underlying actions. It may be true that such comparisons do reveal some important differences that have to do with the musicians' underlying activities, but this significance is often relative to a specific contrast class (e.g., *Kind of Blue* vs *Blue*), and it does not warrant, in any case, the general conclusion that those activities are uniquely at the center both of our appreciation and of the music's merits. In other words, the fact that some qualities are only contingently attached to improvised music as such is not in itself a problem, as long as they

are commonly recognized in the practice and judgments of artists, listeners, and critics, as part of the central focus of the appreciation of that music.

To sum up, when, for example, jazz product-improvisations are seen as SSS-instantiations, they can get their aesthetic merits from the "instantiation part," so to speak, if not from their SSS part, thus eliminating the necessity of turning to the improvisers' activities to find an appropriate bearer for the improvisations' aesthetics properties. This means that distinctive aesthetic properties *can* attach to product-improvisations as such. Those aesthetic qualities are grounded in non-structural aspects of the real-time sonification of SSSs, which is something distinct both from the (usually limited) structural properties of improvisations, as well as the activity of improvisers. This provides a first rebuttal for Alperson's argument-by-elimination.

5 Product-Improvisations as Processes

Alperson's argument is also problematic on another front, though: it seems to be relevant only for a restricted class of improvised performances. It is, indeed, far from clear that an SSS can *always* be assigned to a musical improvisation. Alperson took most of his examples of musical improvisations from the realm of mainstream jazz, where it is relatively straightforward to assign an SSS to each improvised performance. The established practice of transcription for purposes of education or musicological analysis clearly confirms this. For example, when Lewis Porter (1985) wants to convince us to look at "jazz improvisation as composition" he does so by transcribing passages of Coltrane's improvisations in *A Love Supreme* and analyzing them to show their motivic structure, highlighting how "motives and thematic ideas reappear at several points during a typical Coltrane's piece, [lending] coherence to the melodic content of the solo" (620). Transcriptions or formal notations are not the only way to attest that SSSs can be assigned to individual improvised performances by members of a given musical world, though. What is minimally required for such an assignation is that the members of that musical world share the concepts of the building blocks that are used by improvisers (e.g., chord progressions, melodic turns, or rhythmic patterns) and of their modes of combinations. Then, (typical) individual improvisations can be individuated by reference to their structure, that is by reference to the building blocks and modes of combination they use. This is normally the case for idiomatic forms of improvisation in the sense popularized by Bailey:

> Idiomatic improvisation, much the most widely used, is mainly concerned with the expression of an idiom – such as jazz, flamenco or baroque – and takes its identity and motivation from that idiom.
>
> *(Bailey 1992: ix)*

In that sense, it is part of the jazz idiom that an improvised chorus has to satisfy a number of melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic constraints. Since jazz musicians, critics, and listeners alike do not seem to have any particular trouble detaching such melodic, harmonic, or rhythmic structures from the actual concrete performances in which they are displayed, treating them as autonomous objects of discussion, it is safe to assume that SSSs are part of the folk musical ontology of the jazz world.

However, there are also many genres of improvised music for which the assignment of an SSS seems hopeless. This happens when a form of improvisation finds its home in a culture or practice where no concepts of building block or of modes of combination are sufficiently clear and individuated such that a particular performance can be analyzed in terms of these building blocks and modes of combinations. This is the case, for example, in many instances of

non-idiomatic improvisation, where the absence of a unique or well-defined idiom makes such analysis and individuation of improvised performances problematic, if not impossible:

> Non-idiomatic improvisation has other concerns and is most usually found in so-called "free" improvisation and, while it can be highly stylized, is not usually tied to representing an idiomatic identity.
>
> *(Bailey 1992: ix)*

The absence of an idiomatic identity makes it not only practically but conceptually impossible to decide on a uniquely relevant SSS. For it is precisely the role of an idiom to provide the dimensions along which an SSS can be abstracted from a mere stream of sound.[7] Even though one may find at some point within a performance of collective free improvisation a relatively stable sound, of a relatively stable frequency, of approximately 440 hertz, it is, at least from the standpoint of radical non-idiomatic improvisation, intrinsically *indeterminate* whether this small part of the whole stream constituted by the performance should be taken as instantiating a tone of pitch *A*. Of course, this is not to say that collective free improvisations lack any sort of structure. It is possible to identify some typical building blocks, for example in terms of specific extended instrumental techniques[8] and general formal features, such as the alternation, at the scale of a whole piece, between sequences of consolidation and sequences of transition (see Borgo 2005). One may well consider such features "structural," but they remain too unspecific to analyze and individuate particular performances. Even though free improvisers do not lack the words and concepts to describe and communicate some elements of their musical practice, the system they form may not be expressive enough to assign non-trivial and sufficiently individuative SSSs to individual performances. Given the existence and cultural relevance of collective free improvisation (Watson 2004; Saladin 2014; Corbett 2016), Alperson's argument seems to rely, at best, on a somewhat narrow view of all the artistic and aesthetic possibilities of musical improvisation.

One natural way to fix Alperson's argument would be to insist that if there are no SSSs, *a fortiori* the aesthetic merits of performances within this genre cannot belong to them, and so have to belong to the actions of free improvisers. But this move is as problematic in the case of SSS-free improvisations as in the case of SSS-instantiations, as there are similar reasons to ascribe primarily the aesthetic qualities of improvisations to the stream of sounds rather than the actions of the performers. First, free improvisations typically generate distinctive sound qualities that are central to its appreciation. For example, when Andy Hamilton writes in *The Wire* that the album *Dans les Arbres* from the eponymous quartet is "one of the finest ECM improv releases in recent years," he does so on the basis of it displaying "the right combination of sounds and textures" – "luminous planes of sounds" that have the power to immerge the listener in incredibly detailed and evocative sonic landscapes.

Second, and relatedly, those aesthetic qualities, although causally (and perhaps constitutively) dependent on the improvisers' actions, are primarily realized in sound, so that the primary focus of aesthetic attention remains the sounds rather than the generative activity. To quote electroacoustic composer Simon Emmerson, it is not rare for "participants and observers in this kind of [freely] improvisatory activity [to] stress a kind of listening much closer to that of the acousmatic composer, focusing on matter of texture, balance, detail, grain, [and] shape" (Emmerson 2007: 114).

For those two reasons at least, we find no good reason to hold onto AT in the case of SSS-free improvisations. What do the aesthetic merits of improvisation attach to, then? A simple answer to this question seems to be that they attach to the stream of sound itself, conceived as an occurrent. But this simple view remains under-specific is many respects. There are many ways to think about occurrents. Linguists and philosophers of language interested in the description and explanation of the

meaning of verbs in natural language – and, in particular, of the meaning of aspectual distinctions – have stressed a difference between events and processes. In a classic paper on this topic, Mourelatos (1978) distinguishes *processes* from *events*, themselves branching into *developments,* on the one hand, and *punctual occurrences*, on the other.[9] Processes, developments, and punctual occurrences all have in common the feature of change, but they differ along the following lines: Punctual occurrences capture either the inception or the climax of an occurrence. They can be dated or placed within a temporal stretch, but they cannot occupy that stretch, nor occur over or throughout that stretch. Developments and processes, in contrast, have an intrinsic duration, in the sense that they do not occur at particular times but only over or throughout stretches of time. Developments and processes differ with respect to what is sometimes called "homeomery." A temporally extended entity "E" of kind "K" is *homeomerous* if and only if there is a nontrivial partition of E's temporal profile, every element of which is of kind K. For example, the flow of a stream of water is homeomerous because it can be partitioned in such a way that every member of that partition is itself a flow of water. In contrast, the extinction of a fire is not homeomerous, for it has no nontrivial partition every member of which is itself the extinction of a fire, for only parts that include the moment when the fires stops are extinctions. Thus, flows of water are classified as processes while extinctions are classified as developments. This difference is related to the fact that developments admit intrinsic inceptions or climaxes, while processes do not. A fire extinction cannot be homeomerous because it has an intrinsic climax, i.e., the point where there is no more fire, whereas the flow of a stream of water is homeomerous in part because it lacks any intrinsic starting or ending point.

With the help of the distinction between processes and developments, we now have a clearer appreciation of the two kinds of views of product-improvisation we want to contrast. For obvious reasons the category of punctual occurrences is irrelevant, so we have to choose between conceiving SSS-free product-improvisations as processes or as developments. (Those processes should not be confused, of course, with the activity of improvising. They constitute, rather, what is produced by that activity). The question, then, turns to whether SSS-free product improvisations are best seen as homeomerous processes or as developments intrinsically involving inceptions or climaxes. When an improvisation instantiates an SSS, it clearly falls within the category of developments for the SSS constitutes itself a complete object, which is progressively carved by the improviser in the course of performance and that comes to a close when the performance stops. When a product-improvisation is identified with an SSS-instantiation, the beginning and ending of the SSS constitute, respectively, the intrinsic inception and climax of a development. This is clearly reflected by the fact that most traditional jazz improvisations aim at "telling a story" (Berliner 1994; Iyer 2004), through solos that have an overall dramaturgy, a beginning/middle/end structure, a sense of temporal and logical connection between the musical events that comprise the solo, and clear tension curves alternating arousal and relaxation that create a strong feeling of directionality and telicity. When no SSS is available, however, such an identification of product-improvisations with developments becomes questionable.

There are, indeed, positive reasons to identify product-improvisations with processes themselves. First, the members of the pioneering free improvisation group AMM explicitly sought "to confine their music to an informal dimension" (Saladin 2014: 69). According to Cornelius Cardew (who played the piano in the early days of AMM), AMM's music is a "very pure form of improvisation operating without any formal system or limitation" (Cardew 1971: xviii). Formal systems and limitations are the main providers of inceptions and climaxes that constitute occurrences as developments. Whenever they are radically negated, as in Cardew and AMM's aesthetics of improvisation, what remains is a dynamic process. As a matter of fact, most of the aesthetic qualities of AMM's music supervene on its *flowing* qualities, rather than on the way it intrinsically develops towards climactic points. As such, those qualities attach to a homeomerous process, rather than to a development.

The second reason is related to an important analogy stressed by Mourelatos (1978) and others (Taylor 1977; Bach 1986), between the process-event distinction and the mass-count distinction. Like objects or things, events are intrinsically discrete, bounded, and countable; like stuff, processes are intrinsically continuous, unbounded, and massive. Of course, individual SSS-free product-improvisations, just like any individual temporally extended complex of sounds, have boundaries (that are common with the silences before and after any given performance) and so can be counted. But this is compatible with a view of such improvisations as process as long as it is clear that those boundaries are merely extrinsic to the process. Considered for what it is intrinsically, a free improvisation is just a massive process that starts wherever it starts and ends wherever it ends only for contingent, extrinsic reasons. This very feature of free improvisation is clearly asserted in the second aphorism presented in the liner notes for *AMMMusic* (1966), which state that "an AMM performance has no beginning or ending." Such an approach to improvisation often results in a strong feeling of indeterminacy: as Matthieu Saladin writes, when AMM performed in the second half of the 1960s, musicians and audiences alike "never truly knew if the performance was really over" (Saladin 2014: 151). More generally, the view of improvisation as akin to a perpetual "work-in-progress," with individual performances forming "a chain of *non-definitive* phenomena" (Jost 1974: 14) – each performance's ending amounting to a momentary rest within a much broader musical process that resumes with the beginning of the next performance – is widely shared within the world of freely improvised music. As such, the identification of SSS-free product-improvisations with processes is probably a natural fit for the folk ontology of many free improvisers.

Thus, investigating the case of SSS-free improvisations, which was not explicitly considered in Alperson's original defense of his thesis, allowed us to suggest a new way to reinstate product-improvisations as worthy of aesthetic attention. Audiences of SSS-free improvisations are not doomed to attend to the improvisers' actions and intentions if they want an aesthetic experience of it; they can also relish in immersing themselves in the massive, continuous, and unbounded musical processes improvisers are producing on stage.

6 The Process Perspective

It should be noted that in Mourelatos' view, processes, developments, and punctual occurrences are categories of *descriptions* (i.e., of verb predications), rather than categories of being *per se*. In many cases, the same continuant can be described by a process predication, if one wants to stress its homeomery and lack of intrinsic inception or climax, or by a development predication if one wants to stress, on the contrary, its lack of homeomery and the intrinsicality of its inception or climax. For example, the same episode of running can be described simply as a run or as a semi-marathon rehearsal, depending on whether the speaker wants to convey merely the activity of running or the accomplishment of the jogger – namely, the distance travelled. More to the point, the same product-improvisation can be seen as an event or as a process, depending on whether one takes its boundaries and articulation points as intrinsic to their occurrence, or as extrinsic determinations. In particular, the fact that an improvisation can be assigned an SSS does not mean that it cannot also be regarded as a process rather than a development. Indeed, adopting such a process perspective on improvisation is sometimes required in order to disclose some distinctive aesthetic qualities that would otherwise remain unnoticed if one were to focus on the SSS, or even the SSS-instantiation.

Keith Jarrett's approach to free improvisation, as evidenced by the series of live recordings published by ECM, serves as a good example. Even though Jarrett's improvisations are not committed to any particular idiom, but rather borrow from a variety of existing idioms – including European romantic music, gospel, and jazz, among others – assigning them an SSS is usually not

insurmountably difficult. Jarrett has himself authorized a transcription of his popular *Köln Concert* and some pianists have recorded versions of some of his improvised concerts, as though they were composed classical works.[10] When asked why he considers the Vienna Concert (ECM, 1992) to be his most successful solo improvisation on record (as of 1997), Jarrett offered the following reply:

> [W]ell let me qualify that – as an object it's not my favorite one. But the solo things all along have been to get away from making an object. So as that, it is the only successful concert on CD or record. In the purest sense I have created the lack of an object. You hear the process and if you can't get into the process, it's nothing. My analogy was like pouring water through a sieve instead of wanting to have the water, you know?
>
> *(Rosenthal 1997)*

Jarrett clearly contrasts taking the music produced that night of July 1991 in Vienna as an object rather than as a process. It should be clear by now what Jarrett means by taking the music as an "object" as opposed to a process. What he has in mind is a contrast between the *Vienna Concert* as (the instantiation of a) completed SSS and the *Vienna Concert* as pure *process*. For, according to Jarrett, the *Vienna Concert* is not about building in real-time a form and taking it to completion, but rather is about creating an ongoing musical flow. Of course, the whole process will have to end at some point, but where and how it ends is irrelevant to the nature of the process.

Second, Jarrett points to the *absence* of an object. This may sound surprising at first, and inconsistent with the idea that the music can be seen both as an object and as a process, both as the instantiation of an SSS and as a flow. Of course, the *Vienna Concert* does instantiate an SSS, but this SSS is in many ways less rich than that of Jarrett's other solo concerts, most notably the *Köln Concert* – to which Peter Elsdon has dedicated an entire book (Elsdon 2013), offering an in depth analysis of its complex harmonic and rhetorical structure. What Jarrett probably means here is that the relevant aesthetic properties of the music produced are those that are apparent from the process perspective, so that when you switch to the object perspective, nothing of aesthetic interest is left to be experienced.

Third, Jarrett makes clear that he *intended* that piece of music as a process, rather than a completed object organized according to a structural design. Even though one can always consider it an object and even, with some transcriptional ability and interpretive ingenuity, extract an SSS from Jarrett's improvisation and arguably turn it into a completed and performable musical work, that sound-sequence-event type is clearly *not* what Jarrett intended to produce, at least not primarily. What he wanted to present was a pure process, something that is best accessed by taking a very specific perspective of the music. Indeed, Jarrett identifies an appropriate hearing strategy that consists of "getting into the process," rather than contemplating the teleological unfolding of an object, from its beginning to its end. In this approach to listening, the music as a process is, at the same time, wholly present to a hearer and wholly changing. The purpose of the project is not to disclose progressively larger and larger parts of the same, self-identical object, but rather to display a pure flow of change. Jarrett's comparison with water flowing into a sieve creates an apt image of this, along with an enlightening analogy that makes clear the processual nature of the music he sought to create. The idea is that the musical process exhausts the product of the improvisation. When the process dies, we are left with nothing. In that sense, Jarrett has created "the lack of an object."

Now, moving the focus from Keith Jarrett's concept of the Vienna concert to its actual properties, it is particularly clear that the sort of musical structures that one sees when one looks at it from an objectual point of view – e.g., its harmonic structure, its large-scale form, etc. – are rather simple, unsophisticated, and considerably repetitive, so that it seems difficult to claim that its aesthetic merits predominantly attach to them. It is only when one takes a process perspective

and lets oneself follow continuously the slowly evolving meditative mood of the concert that one grasps the distinctive and positive (in this context) aesthetic properties of this music, such as its massive, misty, inchoative character yielding a general sense of strangeness and disorientation, as well as a constant search for orientation. These sorts of aesthetic properties clearly attach to the product of Jarrett's improvisation, while receiving its strongest rendering from a processual, rather than an objectual perspective. They are also clearly not properties of Jarrett's actions, such that an appreciative focus directed at Jarrett's actions, rather than the musical product of his actions, would similarly leave in the shadow the distinctive aesthetic properties of this music.

We have, thus, identified two ways to view product-improvisations as the primary bearers of aesthetic properties. In one case, the product-improvisation is best seen as an SSS-instantiation: the distinctive aesthetic properties come from the conjugate sonification and temporalization of the SSS, offering the chance to develop in real-time novel aesthetic properties irreducible to both to properties of the SSS and of the underlying actions. In the other case, the product-improvisation is conceived as a pure process by which the music freely unfolds without any view to progressively developing a coherent whole, but rather aiming at connecting the improviser and their audience within a moving present.

As the example of the *Vienna Concert* shows, those two views of performance are not mutually exclusive. They each exploit a different member of two basic ways of viewing occurrences in general, as developments or processes. The opposition between those two ontologies of product-improvisation is largely a matter of perspective and the choice of one over the other in the analysis of each case is a matter of inferring the best explanation, in the sense that they provide a better explanation of the considered aesthetic judgments of members of the musical culture involving that particular practice. Although it is possible to see the Vienna concert as an SSS-instantiation – of a very minimal and moderately interesting kind – a closer consideration of Jarrett's own intents and the general context of late 20th-century American music, characterized by a renewed interest in processes and minimality,[11] make the categorization of the *Vienna Concert* as a process more descriptively adequate. The fact that it discloses new aesthetic qualities also makes this categorization more explanantory and, thus, preferable.

One may then generalize one step further. The case of the *Vienna Concert* suggests that the dynamical character common to all product-improvisations is the essential locus of the most distinctive aesthetic qualities attached to improvised music. For whether we are dealing with a process or with an SSS-instantiation, we are, in all cases, dealing with the dynamic unfolding of complexes of sounds in time. Overlooking this conceptualization of the products of improvisation as processes is perhaps what kept Alperson and his followers in the grip of AT, and forced them, unnecessarily, to stumble upon a false dilemma (SSSs vs. activities) and, eventually, radically reorient the aesthetics of improvisation towards an aesthetics of activity. We hope we have shown that many varied forms of improvised music invite us, on the contrary, to take seriously an aesthetics of improvisation as sonic occurrences.

7 Conclusion

The aesthetics of improvisation have the well-known problem of singling out the distinctive aesthetic merits of improvisations, especially in comparison to their scripted counterparts. In the musical case, Alperson has argued that focusing on improvisations as products fails to single out those merits, forcing us to turn our appreciative focus instead on the actions of the improvisers. We have argued in this chapter that this move is unfortunate. Alperson is indeed too quick in dismissing the products of improvisations. Once the process perspective is identified – whether through absolute processes or through the temporal unfolding and sonic shaping of sequential sound structures – it clearly reveals properties of the music itself that are in a position to ground

the distinctive aesthetic merits of certain kinds of improvised music. In other words, and despite its wide acceptance among philosophers, we see no need to hold onto the popular view that the aesthetic merit of musical improvisation attaches primarily to the actions of performers, rather than to the music they produce.

Even though we focused here on musical cases, we believe that such a process perspective on improvisation is also relevant outside of this domain. Many non-musical improvised performances are also likely to be best approached as processes, particularly those that adopt a minimalist stance towards their material, deliberately working with structures characterized by their paucity, and/or that envision interactional dynamics as their primary material. For example, in improv theater, performers are frequently encouraged to find "the game of the scene." Such games are even sometimes described as pure processes – the performers discover an implicit rule early into the scene and then follow it by duplicating a given pattern or expanding on it (see Besser et al. 2013: 65). In that perspective, performers and audiences akin are encouraged not to focus on plot exploration or narrative aspects, which may well be inconsistent, but rather on the processual development of the implicit principle that underlies a given situation. Similarly, the performances of contact improvisation are routinely described as "intercorporeal processes" (Flakne 2019: 528), in which the dancers engage, as Steve Paxton explains, in a "free play with balance, self-correcting the wrong moves and reinforcing the right ones, bringing forth a physical/emotional truth about a shared moment of movement" (quoted in Flakne 2019: 528). Creating absolute processes that can be experienced as such by audience members is clearly at the core of many of the most noticeable improvised artforms that have emerged in the second half of the 20th century. But, again, there is no need to turn to avant-garde or experimental practices to highlight the relevance of the process perspective in non-musical improvised artforms. Both improvised dance and improvised theater are *temporal* artforms and, as such, they intrinsically involve the dynamic unfolding of forms that can always be approached as processual occurrences. In other words, there are reasons to take seriously this process-view of the product-improvisations outside music. Such an endeavor would nevertheless require paying closer attention to the specificities of the medium involved (i.e., natural languages and motions) and to assess how it modulates the view suggested here, which treats sound occurrences as autonomous processes. In particular, it remains an open question as to whether speech utterances and gestures can be dissociated from the performers' own actions – both from an ontological and aesthetic point of view – in the same way that sounds can. But if the conclusions reached in this chapter are correct, or at least plausible, then an adequate aesthetics of improvisation should at least thoroughly investigate all that a process perspective can reveal about these improvised artforms.

Notes

1 Roughly, AT1 can be seen as the ontological side of AT and AT2 as its aesthetic side.
2 Brown (1996: 357) identifies this possible construal of AT and rightly dismisses it as absurd.
3 More generally, the problem-solving value ascribed to certain musical works clearly supervenes on the generative activity of the composer (see Levinson 2006).
4 From now on, we shall use "product-improvisation" or "process-improvisation" in order to indicate that we specifically and exclusively intend a product or a process reading of the ambiguous "improvisation."
5 A classic source on this distinction is Twardowski 2017.
6 This view has some affinity with a general view of events as property exemplifications, notoriously defended by Jaegwon Kim (1976). Here the property exemplified is none other than that the property of instantiating a given SSS. An important difference is that Kim thinks of events as exemplifications of property by substances, i.e., continuants, at times, whereas the present view takes SSSs to be instantiated by occurrent entities, sounds.
7 See, for a somewhat representative example among very many, the record *Nightwork (Live at the Sunset)* for the label Futura Marge in 2010 by Evan Parker, Barry Guy and Paul Lytton.

8 One might think of the densely textured, circular-breathing-fueled, multi-phonic arpeggios that have constituted the basis of every Evan Parker solo for the last 40 years.

9 Mourelatos' paper is a contribution to the classification of action verbs that draws itself on the seminal writings of Vendler (1957) and Kenny (1963), themselves ultimately echoing Aristotle's discussion of *kinesis* and *energeia* in Metaphysics, Θ.

10 Pianist Vic Olsen has recorded an album for the CVM label in 2013 pairing Franz Liszt' *Sonata in B minor* with Jarrett's *Bregenz Concert*. Interestingly, in the liner notes, he explains that he "views [Jarrett's] improvised piano concerts as genuine 'real-time' compositions, as perfectly finished works […]. I consider the Bregenz Concert a masterpiece. It isn't very important to me whether the music was improvised or read from a score. I'm concerned with the music itself – the work is what counts. Just by replaying the music, you eliminate the 'happening' status inherent in an event like a concert. It becomes a work it its own right. That's the point I want to get across, and that's why I decided to make this recording […]. My aim in replaying Keith Jarrett's music is to introduce it into the universal repertoire." It is not clear whether or not his recording has been made with the consent of Jarret himself as, to this day, Jarrett has only authorized the transcription of his famous *Köln Concert*.

11 Jarrett started improvising in the late 1960s, in a musical context influenced by both minimalism and post-Cagean composition. In his manifesto "Composition as process" (1958), John Cage writes that his works "are not preconceived objects, and to approach them as objects is to utterly miss occasions for experiences" (Cage 1961: 131). So-called minimalist composers such as Steve Reich, Terry Riley, and Philip Glass have also been at the forefront of this quest for processual music, with their repetitive, albeit ever-changing, compositions. In a short essay titled "Music as a gradual process" (1968), Reich writes that he aims to produce "pieces of music that are, literally, processes" (Reich 2002: 34).

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9

RETHINKING REALTIMENESS IN IMPROVISATION

Sara Ramshaw

> I was indeed very much struck to see how real time, which plays a leading part in any philosophy of evolution, eludes mathematical treatment. Its essence being to flow, not one of its parts is still there when another part comes along. Superposition of one part on another with measurement in view is therefore impossible, unimaginable, inconceivable.
>
> *(Henri Bergson 2007: 2)*

> For Bergson, […] the task of philosophy is not to think the eternal but to think the new as it makes itself in time, for it is nothing other than time itself.
>
> *(Alexandre Lefebvre 2008: 89)*

This chapter is born out of a dissatisfaction with real time. For many years,[1] I have been troubled by the almost reflexive valorization of realtimeness in writings on improvisation, particularly as it causes difficulties for any defensible positioning of Western law as fundamentally improvisational in nature: a negotiation between preexistent rules or laws and the unique and singular circumstances of a case before a judge (Ramshaw 2013a). Legal judgment rarely takes place in what we would conventionally consider "real time," that is, created extempore and communicated as events in the courtroom happen. More commonly, after hearing arguments made by the lawyers and considering all the evidence and submissions, judges reserve their judgments for a later time so as to provide extensive reasoned arguments as to why a decision has been made. Thus, the time of law, both at an ideological and material level, is much more measured – something that can frustrate justice.[2]

Justice takes time, but, at the same time, it must be in real time, as Derrida advances:

> […] a just decision is always required *immediately*, right away, as quickly as possible. It cannot provide itself with the infinite information and the unlimited knowledge of conditions, rules, or hypothetical imperatives that could justify it. And even if it did have all that at its disposal, even if it did give itself the time, all the time and all the necessary knowledge about the matter, well then, the moment of *decision as such*, what must be just, *must* always remain a finite moment of urgency and precipitation; it must not be the consequence or the effect of this theoretical or historical knowledge, of this reflection or this deliberation, since the decision always marks the interruption of the juridico-, ethico-, or politico-cognitive

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> deliberation that precedes it, that *must* precede it. The instant of decision is a madness, says Kierkegaard. This is particularly true of the instant of the *just* decision that must rend time and defy dialectics.
>
> *(Derrida 2002: 255, emphasis in original)*

The time of justice is, thus, an aporetic time. It is the time of aporia, an ongoing mediation between the singular act of decisioning and the necessarily living and surviving context in which decisions are made. In other words, as this chapter will confirm, the time of justice is that of an "improvisatory time."

By way of forewarning, the ensuing examination of time, improvisation and attunement (as imperfect listening) is very exploratory and speculative in nature. Its genesis owes itself to a seemingly casual remark placed in a footnote of one of my recent publications, declaring that "[m]uch more can be said on the relationship between law, attunement and time, but that is for another time" (Ramshaw, forthcoming: fn 197). While I have not yet had the time to thoroughly explore these issues with the rigor I desire, I am using this opportunity to offer some extremely preliminary thoughts about the relationship between temporality, creativity and judgment as they pertain to both the improvisatory arts, particularly music, and the field of law and justice.

One preliminary point of clarification. Why improvised music? Why, in other words, am I focusing my attention on *musical* improvisation as opposed to improvisation in any other area of the arts? To explain, I rely on Yves Citton (2016), who writes:

> […] improvising musicians, over the past decades, have developed a uniquely reflexive awareness about the art of live collaboration, which all of us practice in our daily lives, but which most of us experience without much reflexive thought. The assumption is not that "jazz" musicians are better improvisers than the rest of us (although that may very well be the case), but that they represent *the intellectual vanguard* in the effort to understand the ethical and socio-political implications of the improvisational activities that compose, day in and day out, the very fabric of our common social and political life.
>
> *(160, emphasis in original; see also Sparti 2016: 182, emphasis in original)*

On that note, this article proceeds by first detailing the role of realtimeness in conventional conceptions of improvisation and then deconstructing the singular creative instant of improvisation through the philosophies of both Jacques Derrida and Henri Bergson. I then employ Derridean critiques of spatialized temporality, along with Bergsonian ontologies of "duration" and "irreversibility," to theorize about the dynamic nature of improvisatory time and performance in both law and music, before moving on to consider the operation of these theories in relation to attunement as (imperfect) listening to otherness and creativity in law and society.

1 The Realtimeness of Improvisation: In Music, in Law

Improvisation *takes place* in "an absolutely specific tempo-spatial singularity" (Sparti 2016: 187). Be this a "moment of creation" (185), the "event of performance" (185) or the "creative instant" (Gallope 2016: 150), the importance of time in relation to improvisation is undeniable. Vijay Iyer explains:

> Two main aspects of that class of acts we call "improvised" seem to be (1) a real-time process of making choices and acting on them, and (2) the sense of temporal embeddedness: the fact that these actions take time, and that the time taken matters.
>
> *(Iyer 2016: 74)*

Improvisatory time, whether in law or the arts, thereby occupies two domains of temporality. Firstly, there is the time of immediacy or the instant in which choices are brought to presence, or are made present. Let us call this domain that of the "singular." In order for these decisions to be made, there must be a continuing temporal realm, which, although ruptured and cut by the singular act of decision or judgment, remains ongoing – albeit ever-changing and in movement. This is the domain of the "general." Both domains are vital to our ability to decide and act.

To help explain: the singular act of improvisation must, by necessity, be an inaugural event, a "first time ever" (Derrida 1989: 28). Yet, this first time, in order to be original and unique, must also be a "last time" (29): complete and containable. To be so purely present, though, would, to quote legal theorist Peter Fitzpatrick in the context of legal decision-making, make the act "completely different to us," such that "there would be no possibility of adequate relation to it in order for us to know it" (Fitzpatrick 2001: 43). The singularity of improvisation must, thus, be understood as repetition or, to use Derrida's terminology, "iterability" (Derrida 1989: 51), in which the singular event (of improvisation) only gains meaning through a repetition that is never the same. The singular, creative event of improvisation is accordingly marked by the lack of pure presence, which makes the originality of improvisation possible in the first place, as the following sections will detail.

2 The Creative Instant[3] of Improvisation in Performance

Improvisation in music is supposed to be extempore, immediate. Moreover, this "creative instant of improvisation" (Gallope 2016: 150) happens or takes place at the time of *performance*,[4] as the "simultaneous conception and presentation of art" (Landgraf 2009: 187; see also Smith and Dean 1997: 26; Landgraf 2011: 19; Young and Blackwell 2016: 508; Bertinetto and Bertram 2020: 204). While acknowledging that "there is far more to improvisation than meets the ear" (Berliner 1994: 3), even critical improvisational scholars seem to hold tight to a necessary realtimeness of improvised performance. For instance, one definition of improvisation adopted by prominent Critical Studies in Improvisation (CSI)[5] theorists is that of a "musical practice [… that] embodies *real-time* creative decision making, risk-taking, and collaboration" (Heble and Siemerling 2012: 41, emphasis added). This perception of improvisation as singular and immediate simply reinforces the conception of musicians "making it up as they go along." These "naïve romantic notions of spontaneity, simplicity and lack of expertise" (Smith and Dean 1997: 25), while rife with inaccuracy, remain strong in contemporary society (Gabbard 2004: 315).

"Improvisatory time" is, as a result, a strange beast. In its "purest" form[6] (Smith and Dean 1997: 26), improvisation takes place at the "intersection of performance and creativity" in which improvisers make a succession of choices at the time of performance, which cannot be erased (26). This produces an acute awareness or attentiveness to the "present moment" (26). Yet, the improvisation, necessarily produced "on the spot" (Bertinetto and Bertram 2020: 204), can never be in and of itself total or pure. In other words, this seemingly extempore instant of creation is only generated by virtue of cultural norms and (p)re-established rules (Zumthor 1990: 181, cited in Smith and Dean 1997: 25). Gallope (2016) explains:

> […] improvisation is not simply creative singularity, but is rather a structured practice mediated by a vast multiplicity of absent traces: adopted idioms, cultural practices, and traumatic memories. These would be the mediating criteria for creativity, which structures and focus our unseen anticipations of the future.
>
> *(155)*

As such, improvisation "is never manifest as a kind of *pure presence* – it is not a multiplicity of present moments just as it is not governed by an ecstatic temporal frame wherein the present is

subsumed by past and future" (Moten 2003: 64, emphasis added). Instead, pushing back against linearity, improvisatory time is "rounded, turned" (64); it is, Gallope writes, imbued with "an unknowable multiplicity of structures, memories, histories, anticipations, and determinations" (155). Rather poetically, Tracy McMullen (2016a) describes improvisatory time as follows:

> The present moment blooms out of the past. Tradition flows through the moment. Tradition can flow through the moment without our cohering into a decision. This is how tradition moves and changes. We can operate within and through the patterns that have preceded us, but in a way that does not make them solid. […] Attending to the singular moment […] creates the opportunity to perform in new, unexpected ways.
>
> *(126, fn 32)*

Law, too, blooms out of tradition. But, equally so, the singular moment breathes life into justice and, with no two legal actions being *exactly* the same, judges must improvise on tradition and past precedent every time they are asked to decide a case. Law can, thus, neither dispense with nor be completely determined by tradition. The legal decision instead lies on the border between what it "is" and what it otherwise could be (Fitzpatrick 2001: 89), and every judicial act is, in some sense, a species of improvisation (Ramshaw 2013a).

The negotiation that takes place as between singularity and generality in law has been regarded by some as being in the time of *performance*,[7] a view that has gained momentum since J.M. Balkin and Sanford Levinson first called for the replacement of the study of law and literature "with a more general study of law as a performing art" in 1999 (Balkin and Levinson 1999a: 1518; see also Balkin and Levinson 1999b: 729). As legal texts do not, in and of themselves, constitute the social practice of law (1518–19), Balkin and Levinson sought to broaden the perception of law as not being limited to texts such as legislation, cases and the like. From this emerges a more creative vision of law, bringing it in line with musical improvisation as a creative entity (Ramshaw 2010; see also Lefebvre 2008; MacLean 2012a; 2012b). That said, while the jazz tradition hinges upon a denial of tradition, law's creativity depends, at least in part, on the denial of its own creativity (Ramshaw 2010: 8).

What was missing from Balkin and Levinson's analysis, though, was any discussion of the *time* of law as performance or the close association of performance with "performative immediacy" (Landgraf 2011: 19), especially in the arts. As such, the next section will detail how the time of improvisatory performance often involves spatializing temporality, or the privileging of the *space* (presence) of time.

3 The Spatial Temporality of Creative Performance

For Henri Bergson, time, in accordance with Western thinking, has been "dominated by spatiality, wherein we describe time as a kind of linear movement in an unbounded homogenous medium, similar to how we envision space" (Lipari 2014: 142). According to legal scholar James MacLean, our spatio-temporal experience of time is created when we withdraw ourselves from our involvement in the "flow of experience";[8] having stepped out of it, we then direct our attention back to it (MacLean 2012a: 82). In contrast, Bergson advocates for "time without space, without qualification and measure" (Lipari 2014: 142). Bergsonian time involves "a ceaseless movement of flowing and fluxing" (MacLean 2012a: 82). Pure duration, or what Bergson calls *durée*,[9] is best described as "a succession of qualitative changes, which melt into one another, without precise outlines, without any tendency to externalize themselves in relation to one another, without any affiliation with number: it would be pure heterogeneity" (Bergson 2005: 104).

To claim, challenging Bergson, that temporality is spatial does not mean that it "transmutes into space." Rather, it "imbues qualities of space" (Chowdhury 2020: 57). As Bergson explains, spatio-temporality is "what enables us to distinguish a number of identical and simultaneous sensations from one another; it is thus a principle of differentiation other than that of qualitative differentiation, and consequently it is a reality with no quality" (Bergson 2005: 95).

Insofar as space is inherently linked to presence (Morin 2015: 27), not only is this vision of time anti-Bergsonian, it also cannot be sustained vis-à-vis Derrida's deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence (Derrida 1976). Unlike Henri Bergson, though, Derrida does not give metaphysical priority to creative time over the processes of spacing. As noted by Gallope (2016), for Derrida, "space and time are co-implied" (150). One example of this co-implication, which also brings law into the discussion, can be found in Derrida's short essay, "Declarations of Independence" (Derrida 1986),[10] in which he reflects on various themes such as time, place, signature and event, to name a few (de Ville 2008: 88). Although he makes no reference to "improvisation" in his text, Derrida exposes the deficiencies of a spatial temporalization of (legal) performance as pure presence and/or performative immediacy.

The subject of Derrida's "Declarations of Independence" is, if not already obvious, the 1776 American Declaration of Independence, which, in its signing, formally renounced the English legal system and thereby created the United States of America (Tyler 2012: 956). In this essay, Derrida exposes the spatial temporality of the presence of the signature that, by necessity, founds the new nation as "illegal," only becoming legal "after the fact" (Derrida 1986: 21). Thus, time and space become, as mentioned above, co-implied. To explain, the creation of any fundamental law, such as a first constitution, cannot simply precede that which initiates it. The presence of the signature, in other words, as necessary to create the law, retrospectively authorizes the originary act of signing (20).

The "good people" of the United States of America, in other words, did not exist prior to the signing of the Declaration, at least not "*as such*" (10, emphasis in original). They are, in law and fact, born in the signatory performance: "The signature invents the signer" (10). And yet, the originary signing is not possible without the one who signs. This is the spatial-temporal paradox of the event of signature, as Derrida explains: "There was no signer, by right, before the text of the Declaration which itself remains the producer and guarantor of its own signature" (10). The Declaration created "the people"[11] who needed to exist in order to sign it (de Ville 2008: 89). Accordingly, the State founded itself by giving itself the authority to sign *after* the act of signature, or what Derrida calls "a sort of fabulous retroactivity" (Derrida 1986: 10): "Everything happens in relation to an originary given, to the law of the law: I exist" (Cixous 1991a: 19). Thus, Derrida reveals how the pure presence or "absolute singularity" of the performance of (legal) signature is, as with performance in general, an impossibility – "a present and singular intervention, or 'something' that happens for the first and last time […] is always split, dissociated from itself" (de Ville 2008: 103).

The impossibility of creative performance as pure presence in law belongs also to improvisation. Says Derrida:

> It's not easy to improvise, it's the most difficult thing to do. Even when one improvises in front of a camera or microphone, one ventriloquizes or leaves another to speak in one's place the schemas and languages that are already there. There are already a great number of prescriptions that are prescribed in our memory and in our culture. All the names are already preprogrammed. It's already the names that inhibit our ability to ever really improvise. One can't say what ever one wants, one is obliged more or less to reproduce the stereotypical discourse. And so I believe in improvisation and I fight for improvisation. But always with the

> belief that it's impossible. And there where there is improvisation I am not able to see myself. I am blind to myself. And it's what I will see, no, I won't see it. It's for others to see. The one who is improvised here, no I won't ever see him.
>
> *(Dick and Kofman 2005: 93)*

This has led many, especially scholars of improvisation, to accuse Derrida of positing a negative conception of creation (Gallope 2016: 148 and 150; see also Peters 2009: 96; Landgraf 2011: 38; Critchley 2014; Goehr 2016: 461). I have defended Derrida in relation to this accusation on more than one occasion (see, for example, Ramshaw 2013a: 9 f.) and have described how, for Derrida, "'possible' and 'impossible' say the same thing" (Derrida 2007: 445). Yet, at other times, I have attempted to unpack Derrida's relationship to improvisation and time as one that, in his words, is on the side of *death* (Derrida 2006: 158; Ramshaw 2008: 171–4), which perhaps gives the impression of negativity. Writes his lifelong friend, Hélène Cixous: "We cannot prove anything. We can only affirm or decide. Derrida is going to *decide* on the undecideable"; he is "going to *decide* on the side of an impossibility of deciding" (Cixous 1991b: 91, emphasis in original).

I am going to take a slightly different approach here and turn, for support, to a thinker known both as a "philosopher of time," as well as "creativity, invention and intuition" (Linstead and Mullarkey 2003: 3) – namely, Henri Bergson. As Bergson's theory of time is one of creation and, according to Chowdhury (2020), "time in law is responsible for its creativity" (40), his theory lends itself nicely to an account of both legal adjudication and creative musical performance that is attuned to attunement.

4 Creative Improvised Performance as Duration

"Real time" is, for Bergson, the experience of *durée*, that is, the "time of conscious experience." It tends toward heterogeneity, quality (as opposed to quantity) and dynamism (Linstead and Mullarkey 2003: 5 f.; see also Chowdhury 2020: 53). By way of a practical example, Linstead and Mullarkey (2003: 6) clarify:

> It is the difference between an hour spent by a condemned prisoner waiting to be executed, an hour spent by a child waiting for the start of their birthday party, an hour spent undergoing interrogation, an hour spent in a traffic jam, an hour walking in the forest, or an hour making love.

Spatialized time, in contrast, is, as mentioned above, "homogenous, quantitative and static" (6). It corresponds with time as represented on a clock, watch, phone or diary/calendar, during which creativity is outlawed (6).

While Derrida never engaged to any great extent with Bergson, both philosophers, according to Alipaz (2011),

> […] share a close affinity with regard to their perspectives of language in the face of time as a double movement. That is, both thinkers operate with an understanding of a particular rupture in the full presence of the present, an expansion of consciousness as a "now" to include a constant deferral to memory.
>
> *(97)*

Not unlike Derrida, for Bergson, the present "never actually *is*" (MacLean 2012a: 83, emphasis in original). Instead, we deduce experience "from the totality of lived experience to make it manageable" (83). There is no such thing as a "purely present instantaneity" in Bergson, that is,

"a moment of time that is strictly and only present" (Lefebvre 2008: 128). Instead, the present passes or flows, making contemporaneous the present and the past. The past and present, reasons Lefebvre, "must occur at the same time" (128). In the words of Bergson:

> Pure duration is the form which the succession of our conscious states assumes when our ego lets itself *live*, when it refrains from separating its present state from its former states. For this purpose it need not be entirely absorbed in the passing sensation or idea; for then, on the contrary, it would no longer *endure*. Nor need it forget its former states: it is enough that, in recalling these states, it does not set them alongside its actual state as one point alongside another, but forms both the past and the present states into an organic whole, as happens when we recall the notes of a tune, melting, so to speak, into one another.
>
> *(Bergson 2005: 100, emphasis in original)*

Contrary to spatial temporality as described above, Bergsonian time as *durée* does not situate the present alongside of or adjacent to the past; rather, they "dovetail one another in an indistinguishable whole" (Chowdhury 2020: 54): "*durée* asserts that the entirety of an accumulating past is constitutive of an every-changing present" (55).

Scant sources exist linking Bergson's philosophies of time and creativity to musical improvisation[12] – despite there being several applications of the theories of Deleuze and Jankélévitch, both followers of Bergson, in musical improvisation (see, for example, Buchanan and Swiboda (2004) on Deleuze;[13] and Gallope (2016) on Jankélévitch).[14] Even less has been written on law, improvisation and Bergsonian time.[15] In an attempt to bring these seemingly disparate concepts into conversation with one another, I am going to focus on one idea that is important not only to law and justice and to musical improvisation, but also to Bergson (and his disciples, such as Vladimir Jankélévitch (see Jankélévitch 2015)): the problem of *irreversibility* (Lefebvre 2015: xv) and mistakes.

5 Irreversibility and the Creative Improvisatory Moment in Music and Law

> From this survival of the past, it follows that consciousness cannot go through the same state twice. The circumstances may still be the same, but they will act no longer on the same person, since they find him at a new moment of his history. Our personality, which is being built up each instant with its accumulated experience, changes without ceasing. By changing, it prevents any state, although it may be superficially identical to another, from ever repeating it in its very depth. This is why our duration is *irreversible*. We cannot live over again a single moment, for we would have to begin by effacing the memory of all that had followed. Even if we could erase this memory from our intellect, we could not remove it from our will.
>
> Thus our personality shoots, grows and ripens without ceasing. Each of its moments is something new added to what was before. We may go further: it is not only something new, but something unforeseeable.
>
> *(Bergson 1998: 5 f., emphasis added (S. R.))*

Bergson could just as well be speaking about improvisation in daily life in the above excerpt. Every day, all day, we improvise; our lives are a series of constant, irreversible improvisations in movement and flow. At the same time, though, two points are worth noting: Firstly, just because we are improvising all the time, does not mean we are any "good" at it, or that our improvisations are "just" and/or ethical (McMullen 2016b: 30). As I have written elsewhere, there is a "dark side" to improvisation of which we must always be mindful (see Ramshaw 2010; 2013b; Ramshaw et al. 2018: 6). Equally important, we must remember that these singular moments of improvisation are

only (re)presentable or comprehensible vis-à-vis a more generalized context of behavior and understanding. That said, an attentiveness to the irreversibility of the creative improvisatory moment has important ramifications in the fields of both music and law, especially as it relates to *mistake(s)*.

Paul Stapleton and I have written elsewhere on improvisatory mistakes in both law and music (if I may):

> A mistake made during an improvised musical performance may be aesthetically unpleasant, but is rarely lethal or dangerous. Members of the listening audience (and perhaps even the other musicians on stage) may not even notice the gaffe. A mistake in law, by contrast, can have dire consequences. Wrongly convicted persons can be imprisoned, sometimes for life. Those mistakenly freed are at liberty to commit further crimes, including violent ones. That said, lawyers and legal academics have much to learn from musicians regarding their approach to mistake in ephemeral performance. Transitional justice studies often link failures and wrongs with apology and reconciliation […]. Yet, when viewed through the practice and techniques of improvisation, failure does not necessitate apology. In improvisation, it is more about recognising failures and being accountable through future actions, rather than archiving the mistake(s) and apologising for such. Doing rather than saying. Un-remembering rather than re-inscribing. Responding to the new situation with knowledge and confidence, without the weight of guilt.
>
> *(Ramshaw and Stapleton 2016: 50)*

Alessandro Bertinetto reasons extensively and convincingly about the act of mistake-making in improvised music as a pronounced possibility due to the "coincidence of musical invention and musical performance" (Bertinetto 2016: 86). Yet, far from something that should be feared or avoided, Bertinetto exposes the potential of mistakes in relation to normative orders as dynamic and reciprocal (90). This relationship is as follows:

> The normative framework changes […] in virtue of the "mistake," which, in turn, changes its status and […] it is no more a mistake. This occurs, say, when a musical event E1, which at the time T1 is (perceived as) a mistake, is no more (perceived as) a mistake at time T2. The reason of this change is this: the normativity of the performance has been transformed by a second musical event E2, with which at T2 one reacts to E1. In other words, E1 retroactively acquires a different meaning in virtue of E2.
>
> *(90)*

The above example might, at first glance, appear to challenge Bergson's "dynamic ontology of irreversibility" (Guerlac 2006: 19), as that which "shapes and regulates itself *retroactively*" (91, emphasis in the original). However, Bertinetto goes further, to demonstrate how normative and aesthetic evaluations are, to a certain degree, created in the moment of performance, that is, created in "real time" (92). As such, creative "mistakes" can be dynamic in that they have the potential to unpredictably change the "aesthetic normativity in the course of performance" (95). Objectively speaking, the musical event E1 *is* irreversible; however, there is an ever-emergent flow and dynamism in terms of the becoming or coming to presence of the event in the present.

In a more recent article co-authored with Georg Bertram, Bertinetto applies this reasoning to law and judicial reasoning:

> Even if a judge is the best in a specific field and even if she has done everything to attain an ideal preparation for the cases she is dealing with, she still always has to face the risk of erring. Like in an improvisation, it is always possible not to succeed. Someone who perfects herself

> in her capacities still opens herself to making mistakes. […] However, there is another point to consider here. "Mistakes" may turn out to be affordances for positively changing the norm in an unexpected situation, thereby inventing a new norm in which the "wrong" application of the (old) norm is savaged as a good application of the (new) norm. Mistakes are not always simple disturbances of normative practices.
>
> *(Bertinetto and Bertram 2020: 210 f.)*[16]

This point is also made by Tracy McMullen (2016a), who champions the skill of improvisation as providing "the ability to go forward and to trust despite the presence or intrusion of 'mistakes.' Indeed, a mistake did not need to be understood as a mistake: a mis-take that entails a new take" (121). For her, it is the *response* to the "mistake" that matters, and this is closely connected to what she labels the practice of the "improvisative" (the performative aspects of improvisation):

> The practice of the improvisative […] is a practice of continual generosity. Generosity here is not a focus on giving; *focusing* on giving is not quite giving. This generosity is the giving of one's total attention to the moment – the "here and now." It is a focus on the singular other, to generously give to the other […]. Giving is not about us deciding what the other wants, but about being open to the moment and responding without an ulterior motive, without an eye toward how this might work out for me or for another, in a waiting type of posture that allows non-conceptual knowing to respond.
>
> *(122 f., emphasis in original)*

The generosity and openness required for an improvisative response to a "mistake" provides us a good segue to the final sections of this paper on attunement and realtimeness in musical and legal improvisation.

6 Attuning to Realtimeness in Improvisation

In his book, *Theology as Improvisation: A Study in the Musical Nature of Theological Thinking* (2013), Nathan Crawford posits a conception of "attunement" that unites the philosophy of Derrida with musical improvisation and reads attunement as a "relation with the other" (29). It is a listening with "attention and humility" (30) that actively engages (with) otherness, as well as singularity and newness. An engagement with otherness, though, like the discussion of the presence of performance above, can never be total or pure. The other is "utterly antithetical," a "totally different kind of existence" (Fitzpatrick 2005: 69). And yet, positioned transgressively beyond, it remains "constantly cued" to us and our world (63), to the pre-existent and general/universal. There must, in other words, be some sort of "subsisting relation and thence some commonality" between the pre-existent and the new, us and the other, as legal theorist Peter Fitzpatrick explains:

> In a pure relation, the two sides would simply appear or disappear in each other and there could be no limiting division between them. We are, then, "bound" to an irresolution between the limit as a condition and quality of our contained, distinct being and the limit as an opening onto all that lies beyond and is other to that being.
>
> *(Fitzpatrick 2001: 59)*

It is from this that my concept of attunement as *imperfect* listening originates. Perfect listening (as unity or self-presence) is, like pure performance, an impossibility. Listening is, instead, always insufficient, "still to come" (Blanchot 1999: 443); it can only but signal the possibility of and the place where true listening can begin (443). Attunement as imperfect listening is always

a listening-*with* (others/the other/otherness), an ever-open listening that takes into account the singularity of the situation, even when constrained by rules/resources/time/etc. Likening attunement to Derridean deconstruction, Crawford (2013) highlights the necessary, yet problematic, "interaction between saying something 'new' and being faithful to the tradition" (35), which are paradoxical features of both musical improvisation and law. Just as judicial decision-makers must negotiate between pre-existing generalized precedents or laws and the new and singular case or set of facts to which they are applied, so too must musical improvisation – in order to be recognized *as* improvisation – gesture or strain towards a particular melody or musical tradition, even as it takes flight into seeming randomness and chance (Ramshaw, forthcoming).

7 The Creative Time of Improvisation: Attunement as Imperfect Listening in Duration

In this final section, I will offer a very modest and cautious contribution to the conception of creative time in improvisation as attunement in duration. Uniting theorists of attunement, such as Crawford (2013) and Lipari (2014), with Bergson facilitates a more dynamic and vibrant conception of improvisatory time in music and law, one that is fiercely attuned to movement and difference:

> What is time? We typically think of time as an indistinct but insistent river flowing eternally from past to present to future. But this view obscures the many ways the lives of our minds are a tangle of braided streams, currents, shallows, eddies, and swamps of memory and anticipation, sparkling with an occasional visit to the present moment. It also obscures the rich dialogicality of every moment, echoing eternally with words from the past, often below the surface of awareness.
>
> *(Lipari 2014: 141)*

As Bergson makes evident, "there is no perception which is not full of memories. With the immediate and present data of our senses we mingle a thousand details out of our past experience" (Bergson 2010: 17). Attunement in duration, thus, listens (imperfectly) to an "other" or otherness that cannot be quantifiable, but instead is always in movement and flux. However, according to Peters (2009), above all else, Bergson's theory of duration promotes novelty and creativity (133), which offers much to the legal and artistic fields. He reminds us that creativity is a process that we must be prepared to give ourselves over to if we desire justice and (social) change (Smith and Dean 1997: 33). Fred Moten reflects beautifully on what is at stake, more than anything, in the process of creative improvisation:

> to be fascinated by the world and by being with one another and to move in this fascination's undercommon concern with or engagement in idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity, *but by way of a certain thickness of accent*, a counterscholastic accompaniment, that troubles the standard speech that is misunderstood to have been studied.
>
> *(Moten 2016: 134, emphasis in original)*

The skilled process of attunement (as imperfect listening) in duration is not entirely intuitive, which is why musicians and sonic artists are held in such high regard as the "intellectual vanguard" (Sparti 2016: 182) of improvisational practices. These artists experience, night after night, the dynamic flow of improvisatory time as that which is "not marked out by the oscillations of a perfectly repeating system […], but one that is lived and felt in the pulsating rhythms of life itself" (Ingold and Hallam 2007: 10). The past leans over the present and presses against the future. "In this pressure," argue Ingold and Hallam (2007), "lies the work of memory, imagined not as a

register or drawer in which records of past events are filed away, but as the guiding hand of a consciousness that, as it goes along, also remembers the way" (11). This is duration as improvisation, as improvisatory time.

I now make one final plea to open one's ears to all that is beyond and give Bergson the last word on the subject:

> There is no register, no drawer […]. In reality, the past is preserved by itself, automatically. In its entirety, probably, it follows us at every instant; all that we have felt, thought and willed from our earliest infancy is there, leaning over the present which is about to join it, pressing against the portals of consciousness that would fain to leave it outside.
>
> *(Bergson 1998: 4 f.)*

Notes

1 I remember confessing my frustration regarding the focus on realtimeness in, especially musical, improvisation and the difficulties it posed for my theory with George E. Lewis over lunch in Bowling Green, Ohio, USA in April 2015. We, along with Tracy McMullen and Mark Laver, had been invited to speak at the Ethics and the Philosophy of Improvisation Symposium, organized by Edgar Landgraf and Rob Wallace, at Bowling Green State University. Although I do not remember the exact phrasing of Lewis' response, I do recall him likewise expressing dissatisfaction with the characterization of musical improvisation through real time and how his book *A Power Stronger Than Itself: The AACM and American Experimental Music* (2008) was attempting to establish a more sophisticated scene of improvisatory time and temporality. Apologies to Lewis for any inaccuracies in my recollection.

2 Compare this with James MacLean's assertion that "Inevitable, though, [judicial] decision making takes place in real time and is constrained by lack of resources and evaluative (rules of evidence, burdens of proof) and subjective (peer scrutiny and public acceptability of decision) elements that provide continual sources of frustration" (MacLean 2012b: 162). Admittedly, many decisions are made quickly in the courtroom and are witnessed by lawyers, litigants and other audience members, such as those decided in Remand Court. However, any written decision of the judge is most likely not made at the time of the (courtroom) performance.

3 On the difference between "moment" (as being "in the moment") and "instant," see Gary Peters (2016): "The moment has duration (which is why the improviser can get 'into it'); the instant does not" (445).

4 Generally-speaking, performance shares many of its qualities with improvisation in that it involves variability and elements of freedom or imprecision; moreover, it typically requires the presence of an audience. Smith and Dean (1997) argue that, while performance and improvisation are not synonymous, improvisation can make the most "radical use of the performance situation" (27). For a brief history of the "performative turn" in the arts, see Landgraf 2009.

5 Helping define the field of study called critical improvisation studies or critical studies in improvisation (CSI) are, for example, Fischlin and Heble 2004; Fischlin et al. 2013; and Lewis and Piekut 2016, to name a few.

6 Smith and Dean (1997) argue that improvisation in art cannot be defined because there is "only a gradient of creative endeavor from pure improvisation to complete composition" (26).

7 For an engaging article on the performative aspects of law, particularly as they pertain to judicial listening and attunement, see Sean Mulcahy's "Silence and Attunement in Legal Performance" (2019).

8 Any mention of "flow" in relation to improvisation and creative performance directs one immediately to the writings of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, especially *Flow* (2002), *Creativity: The Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (1996), and *Finding Flow: The Psychology of Engagement with Everyday Life* (1997). A detailed discussion of "flow" is beyond the scope of this article.

9 In English, "duration," according to Guerlac, "tends to evoke a period of elapsed time considered retrospectively (bounded by time limits of a beginning and an end)" (Guerlac 2006: xiii). Although I will be using both "duration" and "*durée*" here, note that Bergson did not intend for duration to be read in such a restricted manner.

10 Other texts from Derrida are relevant to this issue, but this chapter does not allow for extended discussion of such. See, for example, Derrida 1987; 1992; 2002.

11 For a discussion of the difference between "the people" and "the multitude" as it pertains to improvisation, see Citton (2016: 162–3).

12 David Scott Ross (2012) writes that Gunter's introduction to Bergson's *Creative Evolution* "offers a summary of Bergson's philosophical agenda that captures the essential nature of improvisational practice" (53), although this discussion on the potential application of Bergson to improvised music is only two paragraphs in length and not very useful for my purposes.
13 According to Leonard Lawlor's entry in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2016), Gilles Deleuze's *Bergsonism* (1966) "marked the reawakening of Bergson's work."
14 Arnold Davidson has been credited with introducing Jankélévitch to the English-speaking academia via his 1996 inclusion of two of Jankélévitch's writings in the journal of *Critical Inquiry* (vol. 33, no. 3) (Gallope and Kane 2012: 216).
15 For interesting writings on law, music and Deleuze, see Moore 2012a and Moore 2012b.
16 What if one could repeat a mistake enough times such that it sounded inevitable? Is this a hiding of a mistake, an admission of mistake, a means of reconciling a mistake with what should have been or is it simply not a mistake at all? And what role do audience members listening to the repeated mistake, play in making conscious, in archiving, the mistake for which we – without guilt – will not apologize? (Ramshaw and Stapleton 2016: Appendix, 67).

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PART II

Art and Improvisation

Aesthetical, Ethical, and Political Perspectives

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10
APPRECIATING IMPROVISATIONS AS ART

David Davies

1 Improvisations as Art: The Issues

In this chapter, I address two inter-related questions about improvisation:

1. Can improvisations be works of art? This question admits of a number of readings. The term "improvisation" can refer both to a particular human action and to the product of such an action. As *a human action*, an improvisation can be regarded as a performance, so we might ask whether performances, more generally, can be artworks, and, if so, whether a performance that is an artwork can either be, or have as one of its proper parts, an improvisational action. As the *product* of a human action, an improvisation might be appreciated either simply for its "intrinsic" properties, or also for those properties as possessed *in virtue of* the improvisatory action bringing those properties into existence. Again, we might ask whether, in either case, an improvisation, qua product, can be an artwork. To address any of these matters, we will need to clarify both (a) what it is for something to be an improvisational action or the product of such an action and (b) what it is for something to be a work of art. Since the second question obviously merits much more discussion than this chapter can accommodate, I take my task to be to canvas plausible answers to this question and then to consider the extent to which such answers might allow at least some improvisations to count as artworks.
2. If there are indeed improvisations that are artworks, or proper parts of artworks, what is involved in the appreciation of such works, and how does this compare to the appreciation of other artworks? As we shall see, answers to this second question are implicated in one kind of approach to the first question. One reason for thinking that some improvisations are artworks is that they are appreciable in the same ways as other things that are unquestionably artworks. It is in this sense that our two concerns are "inter-related," as noted above, and for this reason that our consideration of the second question will be integrated into our consideration of the first.

2 What is an Improvisation?

I noted above the process/product ambiguity of a term like "improvisation." Like the terms "representation" and "expression," "improvisation" may be used to refer either to the product of an agent's activity or to the activity itself. If we are interested in the features that

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distinguish improvisations from other things, however, it seems more promising to focus on the nature of improvisational activity. For, even if, as we shall see below, there are features that tend to be distinctive of the products of improvisational activity, these features are not always present and their presence is best viewed as a consequence of the process that brings them into being. Indeed, when we speak of improvisation in everyday contexts, we are usually characterizing an activity rather than the product of that activity, and our interest is in describing and assessing what was done by an agent. Faced with unexpected dinner guests, John may explain the somewhat unusual fare being presented at the table by saying that, lacking an opportunity to go to the shops, he just improvised something. In such a situation, he may be praised for his resourcefulness or ingenuity. Or, caught out in an unexpected storm, Jane may be commended for the way in which she is able to improvise an umbrella using some materials in her rucksack. While our judgments in such cases take account of the qualities of the improvised product – it being at least minimally fit for purpose – this is usually in the service of assessing the improvisational act that brought this thing into existence. This contrasts with the other process/product terms noted earlier. The primary referent of "representation," for example – at least as this term is used in discourse on artworks – is the product of a representational act rather than the act itself. Vermeer's *View of Delft* is a representation (from an imaginary perspective) of the eponymous Dutch city in the middle of the 17th century, and is the product of Vermeer's act of thus representing that city. Our primary interest in *how* Vermeer represented Delft is an interest in the representational product, rather than the representational process whereby this was accomplished, even if our artistic interest in the work as a representation also includes a secondary concern with the representational process. But our primary focus, if we attend to how John improvised the dinner, is usually in the process of improvisation. Whether this also applies to artistic improvisations remains to be seen.

What, then, are the distinguishing features of improvisational activity? Most theorists take the central such aspect to be *spontaneity*, the lack of a preconception on the part of an agent as to how a given goal is to be achieved, so that achieving that goal calls for ingenuity and inventiveness on the agent's part. (Kania [2011: 395] avoids including an explicit reference to spontaneity by defining an improvisation as "a performance event guided by decisions about that event made by the performer shortly before the event takes place," but this seems to be merely a verbal difference.) It is this feature that is usually cited by those who write on the nature and value of improvisation in the performing arts. Philip Alperson, for example, takes it to be a matter of general agreement that "improvising music is, in some sense, a spontaneous kind of music making" (Alperson 1984: 17). Stephen Davies similarly characterizes improvisations, or "music making *simpliciter*," as "spontaneous and unregulated musical playings that are not of works" (Davies 2001: 11). The same feature seems to distinguish improvisational activity more generally. If we were to discover that John was actually following a recipe that he selected because he knew he had the relevant ingredients to hand, then although we might admire him for thinking of this recipe as one that might be used in these circumstances, we would be unlikely to say that he had improvised the meal. Similarly, if Jane always includes the relevant items in her rucksack when hiking because she knew from past experience that they could be used to provide some shelter from the elements, we would praise her for her foresight rather than for her improvisational skills.

While spontaneity in agency in addressing a task is generally taken to be the mark of improvisation, this consensus has not gone unchallenged. In a response to Alperson, Carol S. Gould and Kenneth Keaton (2000) argue that what they term "fluency" in departing from a score is what is crucial for musical improvisation. Spontaneity need not be present – an element interpolated

into a performance of a musical work might have been preplanned yet still be properly described as an improvisation. I have critically discussed the arguments offered for these claims elsewhere (Davies 2011: 151–4). I shall, however, comment briefly on one of these arguments. Gould and Keaton claim that even the interpretation required in performances of classical works requires improvisation:

> Every performance requires the performer to improvise […]. A player will respond to a variety of elements in performance. While melodies and harmonies may be specified in advance, the precise realization of dynamics, rhythmic subtleties, timbre, intonation, and articulation arises at the moment of the performance, and will vary (often considerably) from performance to performance, even when the piece is played by the same musician.
>
> *(Gould and Keaton 2000: 145)*

This claim seems to operate with a weaker notion of improvisation than the one that concerns Alperson and other proponents of the standard view. Citing the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, which defines improvisation as "the creation of a musical work […] as it is being performed" (Alperson 1984: 20 f.), Alperson stresses that there is an element of composition in improvisation. It is because the product of an improvisation is a novel musical construction that we can appreciate in it some of the same kinds of qualities that we appreciate in a performable musical work. But Gould and Keaton, in the passage cited above, grant that the interpreting musician does not exercise creative freedom in respect of the musical *structure* of her performance. She improvises only in respect of the ways in which this structure is realized in sound. Thus, what the interpreter does fails to exemplify what Alperson takes to be one of the distinctive values of improvisation (see below).

In setting out the standard view of improvisation, I characterized *spontaneity* as the lack of a preconception on the part of an agent as to how a given goal is to be achieved. It might be thought, however, that, in more radical improvisational performances, what is lacking is not merely a preconception as to how an accepted goal is to be achieved, but also a preconception as to what the *goal* of the performance *is*. In such cases, it might be said, the goal of the performance is *itself* something "improvised," performatively negotiated by the performer(s) during the performance. All that is given as a goal in such cases is something like "achieving a good artistic (or musical, theatrical etc.) result," and this trivializes the requirement. (I am grateful to Alessandro Bertinetto for raising this issue.) But, in fact, even a goal of this nature is *not* trivial once we take account of the norms – individual in the case of a sole performer or shared in the case of an ensemble – that give content to talk of a "good" result. As a number of authors have stressed, even the freest improvisational performances are governed by certain norms or rules with which performers are expected to comply, such as attending to and developing upon what others in an ensemble are doing (see Richard Cochrane's amusing anecdote to this effect [2000: 142, n. 22]). Even a consensus amongst the performers to *ignore* the contributions of others would serve as a norm that defines the values sought in the performance. Alperson insists that "even the freest improviser, far from creating *ex nihilo*, improvises against some sort of musical context" (1984: 22). And Stephen Davies stresses that improvisations are subject to

> the general social, stylistic, formal, syntactic, and other constraints governing the culture's music […]. The musician usually acquires a repertoire of phrases and figurations. Some of these will be of her own invention and others belong more widely to the performing community. When she improvises, she draws on this stock.
>
> *(Davies 2001: 12)*

3 The Artistic Status of Improvisational "Frames"

Let us agree that the distinguishing feature of improvisational activities is the agent's spontaneity in seeking to achieve her prescribed goal, in the broad sense just characterized, where this involves determining some aspects of the overall structure of her activity and its product and not merely the interpretation of predetermined instructions. It is clear that improvisational activity so construed occurs in the performing arts – not only, as already exemplified, in music but also in theatre and dance. Some such improvisational activities involve referencing a pre-existing "frame," albeit one that constrains the performer in much more negotiable ways than would a musical score as used in a classical performance. Jazz improvisations often take, as such a frame, a "standard" musical piece written for interpretation rather than for improvisation (e.g., "My Funny Valentine," "My Favorite Things"). Other frames are written precisely to serve as such for the improvisations of performers (e.g., Miles Davis' "Blue in Green," Thelonious Monk's "Straight, No Chaser"). But some improvisational activities in the performing arts have the quality remarked upon by Alperson in a purer form. In such cases, there is no pre-existing musical frame that guides or constrains the activities of the performers, and all the structural features of the resulting acoustic manifold are a product of the improvisational activity. Keith Jarrett's solo piano improvisations, the best known of which took place in Cologne on January 24, 1975, are a much-cited example of this.

All such improvisational performances and their products are "artistic" at least in the sense that they have a place in the broadly institutional context of the performing arts. Our question is whether they can rightly be viewed as works of art. Before proceeding, however, it is important to distinguish this concern from another question: whether the things that serve as frames for many improvisational performances are themselves works of art. It is natural to think that the relationship between such frames and the improvised performances that employ them mirrors the relationship between a performable work of classical music and performances of that work. It is also natural, therefore, to think of improvisational frames as a species of performable work. Andrew Kania, however, has argued (Kania 2011) that such a view is incorrect. Kania is not, I think, disputing that at least some of the "standards" that serve as frames for improvisation are themselves performable works of music. "My Funny Valentine" and "You Don't Know What Love Is," for example, were written to be performed in a musical and a film, and were surely conceived by their composers as multiply performable works with certain specifiable requirements for their correct performance. Kania's examples of standards are instrumental pieces written for performance by jazz ensembles, such as Duke Ellington's "Sentimental Lady." What Kania denies is that such standards, *when used as vehicles for improvisation*, stand to those improvisations in a relationship analogous to that in which performable works of classical music stand to performances of those works. In this case, so Kania claims in his witty title, we have "all play and no work."

Kania's principal reason for thinking this is so is that there is no workable way of identifying a particular repeatable sound structure with which such a frame can be identified. Neither the "common" suggestion that the work is "something like a harmonic structure plus a melody, or at least a melodic shape" (Kania 2011: 392), nor James Young and Carl Matheson's proposal (2000) that "jazz works are defined […] by sets of tacit guidelines for performance" (Kania 2011: 393), is able to accommodate the range of performances taken in jazz practice to be acceptable versions of a given standard, given the scope allowed for improvisation. It is not improvisation *per se* that counts against ascribing "performed work" status to improvisatory frames, Kania maintains, since improvisation has at times played a prominent part in performances of classical works. Rather,

> the sheer amount of improvisation in a typical jazz performance and the centrality of improvisation to the tradition seem to indicate that the proposed candidate for the enduring work

> in jazz, the standard, is more an aid to the performers' real-time creativity […] than a work to be instanced in multiple performances.
>
> *(Kania 2011: 396)*

A further consideration adduced by Kania is that artworks, in the sense of the term that concerns us here, are foci of critical and appreciative attention in an artistic tradition (Kania 2011: 391), but the focus of such attention in jazz is the performance and not something thereby performed. Again, he maintains, this distinguishes jazz frames from works of classical music.

Julian Dodd (2014) has argued that Kania's arguments fail to discredit the "common" idea of jazz frames as performable works individuated in terms of "a harmonic structure plus a melody." He holds that, while our interest in listening to jazz is indeed primarily an interest in the improvisatory activities of the performers, these are rightly heard as improvisations *on* the frame so conceived, and being recognizable as such is a condition that some of Kania's proposed counter-examples to the "common" idea – purported performances of "All of Me" where the melody is never sounded, for example – fail to meet. While the essentially improvisatory aims motivating jazz performance are distinct from the kinds of concerns for authenticity governing much classical performance, we should still think of the "standards" used as a basis for improvisation as multiply performable works identifiable in terms of melodic and harmonic constraints. (See also Bertinetto 2012: 116–20, on how we should conceive the relationship that exists between a "frame" and an improvisational performance.)

The exchange between Kania and Dodd is restricted to improvisational frames used in *musical* improvisation, and in particular in jazz improvisation. Whether parallel considerations would arise in respect to improvisational performances in other performing arts will depend upon how we resolve issues that cannot be addressed here. In particular, Kania and Dodd take as given an understanding of classical music performance as the performance of a repeatable piece whose status as a work is not in dispute. They disagree over whether a parallel analysis applies to jazz improvisations on a "frame." But in theatre and dance, a central question in recent scholarship has been the applicability of the "classical paradigm" – according to which performances are standardly of multiply performable works – to these arts (see, for example, Hamilton 2007, on theatrical performance, and my discussion of these issues in Chapter 6 of my 2011 work).

4 Improvisations as Artworks: Two Inconclusive Arguments

Kania claims, and Dodd agrees, that the primary focus of our critical and appreciative interest in jazz is the improvisatory performance. He further claims, as we saw above, that, in the context of interest to us, "the relevant sense of 'work of art' is its use in referring to something like the primary focus of appreciation in a given tradition" (Kania 2011: 391). This might suggest that Kania would endorse the idea that improvisations are works of art. But, in fact, he holds that improvisations do not qualify as such because they fail to meet a further necessary condition for being so. This condition was proposed in an earlier work by Paul Thom (1993). Thom's immediate concern is with the purported artistic status of improvised performances like Jarrett's. His argument, however, seems to count equally against performances of repeatable works themselves being artworks, even though in this case there is also an artwork – the work being performed – open to appreciation. Thom maintains that there is a unified conception of "work of art" that applies across the arts:

> A work of art can be defined as an enduring thing, created in some medium (such as oil on canvas) by an author (such as a painter) in order to be beheld in a particular kind of way (namely, to be viewed aesthetically).
>
> *(Thom 1993: 28)*

Performable works such as works of classical music, Thom argues, satisfy this description if we view them, as he does, as directives for performance that are appreciable in virtue of performances that satisfy those directives. For, even though the performances themselves are ephemeral, the performance directives endure. In the case of a purely improvised performance such as Jarrett's, however, there is merely the production of a sound sequence on a particular occasion. Thom (rightly I think – see Davies 2011: 158 ff.) rejects the idea that a performance like Jarrett's itself brings into existence an enduring performance directive binding on future performances. He concludes that such a performance neither endures nor instantiates something else that endures. What was offered for the appreciation of the audience in Köln, therefore, was not, either directly or indirectly, a work of art but only an "aesthetic object," an arrangement of aesthetic qualities that can be appreciated as such.

In a response to Thom, Peter Kivy (1995: 124–8) disputes both the claim that it is part of our concept of a work of art that the latter must be an enduring entity, and the claim that performances do not endure. A performance endures, Kivy argues, insofar as it is repeatable. And performances are repeatable because numerically distinct performances by an orchestra can manifest the same interpretation of the work performed. This inference seems questionable however, in that it conflates questions about performances with questions about productions and interpretations. A production of a play, like a conductor's interpretation of a symphony, certainly endures in the sense that there can be different performances of that production or interpretation at different times. In this sense, a production or interpretation, no less than a play or a symphony, can be characterized in terms of an enduring performance directive. But individual performances do not endure, nor are they repeatable, and it is the artistic status of such performances that is Thom's concern. Nor can the "enduring" nature of improvisational performances be defended on the grounds that such performances are discoveries of multiply performable works, as Kivy (1983) has claimed. For, even if composition is viewed as a kind of discovery, it requires a distinct act on the part of the improviser (see, e.g., Wolterstorff 1980: 64; Thom 1993: 66; Davies 2011: 158 ff.; Bertinetto 2012: 111 f.); and, in the cases Kivy describes, it would be the product of an improvisational performance and not the performance itself that endures.

Kivy's first claim – that a work of art need not endure – is more difficult to assess if we simply appeal to the linguistic intuitions upon which presumably informed individuals (e.g., Thom and Kivy) may differ. Kania offers a further reason, however, for thinking that endurance is a necessary condition for something to be a work of art. He holds, as we have seen, that we apply the term "work of art" to those things that are the primary focus of appreciation in a given artistic tradition, and grants that improvisational performances meet this necessary condition. But, he further claims, this cannot be *sufficient* for something to qualify as a work of art:

> If jazz performances are works of art in their own right, then so must classical performances be, since classical performances are produced with an eye to their being aesthetically rewarding (or whatever your criterion of arthood requires) and are a primary focus of appreciation in the classical tradition.
>
> *(Kania 2011: 398)*

An additional requirement for something to be a work of art is that it be an "enduring entity" or an object. However, in trying to motivate this additional requirement, Kania points to a different consideration:

> Works of art are not just things intended to be worthy of aesthetic appreciation, but things worked on over time so that their aesthetic or artistic value can be maximized.

> Jazz performance, to the extent that it is improvisatory, is not perfected ahead of time, like these paradigms of work creation.
>
> *(ibid.)*

In this sense, he argues, performances of classical music, which are preceded by considerable group rehearsal and preparation, are better equipped to be works of art than improvisations. But now the issue seems to be not endurance but aesthetic refinement, where the latter might be thought to be a matter of how works are valued rather than of what makes them works.

Some light may be thrown on these matters if we turn to an argument offered *in support of* the claim that improvisations are works of art. In a paper written prior to Thom's and Kania's, to which they both take themselves to be responding, Alperson (1984) points to analogies between our appreciative practices with respect to improvisations and our appreciative practices more generally regarding works in the performing arts. He argues that jazz improvisations, as individual events, should be treated as artworks because the criteria that we bring to bear in our appreciative assessment of improvised performances are in many cases the same as those that we bring to bear in our appreciative assessment of performable musical works. He notes, in particular, that improvisers share with composers the task of constructing sequences of sounds that are intended to articulate artistic content. Thus, in each case, we can appreciate the qualities that the resulting sound sequences possess as musical constructions – qualities such as "intelligible development, internal unity, coherence, originality, ingenuity, etc., the artful employment of prevailing idioms, and the emergence of an individual style" (Alperson 1984: 22).

Alperson also notes, however, that, if these are taken to be the sole criteria for evaluating improvisations, it is likely that, in general, the latter will compare unfavorably to performable works. For it is difficult to achieve, on the fly so to speak, the kind of structural complexity that composers can confer on their compositions. Composers are able to reflect and revise, to have at their creative disposal – at a time both earlier and later – elements in the same composition, and to correct, on further consideration, false steps that initially seemed promising. Improvisers lack such resources, however. To counter this concern, Alperson insists that the proper appreciation of improvisations requires that we view them not merely in terms of the musical constructions that are their products but also in terms of the actions that generate these products. These improvisational actions, no less than their products, can be objects of aesthetic contemplation. First, we can appreciate, in the actions of improvisers, the same qualities that are manifest in performances of performable works – "sensitivity, lyricism, and general virtuosity," for example. But second, what distinguishes the actions of the improviser are the risks she takes, precisely because she is creating a musical structure without the resources for revision available to the composer. What is a potential weakness if we consider the improvisation purely as a musical construction thus becomes a source of strength when we consider it as an action. Similar considerations would apply to our appreciative interests in improvisations in other performing arts – for example, Steve Paxton's contact improvisation in dance or the free theatrical improvisations of Del Close.

Alperson's claim, therefore, is that our aesthetic interest in an improvised performance is an interest both in the construction, qua improvised product, and in the action of constructing it, qua improvised performance. This seems to speak to both the considerations adduced by Kania in support of the "endurance" requirement for works of art. To the initial claim that if we count improvised performances as artworks we must also count performances of classical works, Alperson might respond that these differ in that performances of classical works do not involve the construction of a musical manifold. Furthermore, it might also be said that, standardly, performances of classical works are the primary focus of appreciation because this serves our interest in the works performed, whereas in the case of improvisational performances our appreciative focus on a performance serves an interest in appreciating the latter for its own sake. If it be objected that

sometimes we focus our appreciative attention on a performance of a classical work because we are interested in the appreciable features of the performance itself, it might be responded that, in such cases, we *should* take the performances themselves to be works of art – a view defended by Thomas Carson Mark (1981) and Peter Kivy (1995), among others. (For a sympathetic discussion of this view that also points to some limitations in its scope, see Davies 2011: 141–8.) To the second claim, that improvised performances lack the refinement and crafting that we expect in works of art, Alperson could respond that our appreciative interest in improvisations is not an interest in the improvised product alone, but in the product as produced through the improvisational activity. We shall return to this idea below.

But do these kinds of features of our aesthetic interests in improvisations speak to Thom's concern that an improvised performance like Jarrett's cannot be a *work of art*? There are at least two reasons to think not. First, Thom has responded to Alperson that the qualities we appreciate in good improvisations – "spontaneity, excitement, and the display of an ability to solve problems and be inventive without preparation" (Thom 1993: 63), for example – are qualities they possess as objects of aesthetic beholding, not as artworks. For, he again insists, artworks must be enduring entities. Second, it might be thought that, if we are trying to establish that improvised performances in the performing arts can be *artworks*, Alperson's strategy of pointing to the kinds of criteria to which we appeal in evaluating such performances is an unpromising one. For none of the kinds of criteria that Alperson cites are exclusive to the evaluation of *artworks*. The criteria cited for assessing musical constructions are applicable to constructions in general, and the criteria of "sensitivity, lyricism, and general virtuosity" applicable to an improviser's playing of her instrument would also be appropriate for judging other non-artistic performances, such as that of a lecturer, as long as we operate with a suitably broad conception of lyricism. And any lecturer who works without a "script" is taking the same kind of risk as an improvising musician. Thus, we cannot demonstrate that improvisational performances in the performing arts are artworks by pointing to the fact that these criteria are applied to such performances, for they are also applied to many things that are presumably *not* works of art.

5 Improvisations as Artworks: A Goodmanian Approach

Let us take stock. Neither of the arguments we have considered thus far seem conclusive in determining whether improvisational performances can be works of art. If "enduring" in the sense proposed by Thom and Kania is taken to be a *necessary* condition for being a work of art, then an improvisation cannot be a work of art, but no compelling reason has been offered for this requirement. If, on the other hand, being properly appreciable in the ways that *bona fide* artworks are appreciable is a *sufficient* condition for being an artwork, then improvisations clearly can be artworks, but since many non-artworks meet this condition, it cannot itself be sufficient. Might it be sufficient when combined with Kania's necessary condition for being a work of art? The suggestion might be that it is sufficient to be a work of art if the thing having certain specified appreciable features is the focus of appreciation in an artistic tradition? Here, however, we may wonder about the appeal to something's belonging to "an artistic tradition" given that our concern is to validate the claim that improvisational performances can be works of art. If improvisational musical performance is indeed an "artistic" tradition, why is this so when many other improvisational practices – for example, many kinds of athletic activity – are not? Those concerned about the parochialism of merely institutional answers to such questions might look for a requirement for being a work of art that speaks more directly to what makes something an artifact that belongs to an artistic tradition. We might locate the arthood of works of art not in the kind of appreciation rightly accorded to them but in the distinctively artistic manner in which they are *intended* to be treated.

The best known such account is Levinson's "historical-intentional" definition of art (1979). According to this, the status of being a work of art depends upon whether a maker intends for her product to be treated in one of the ways considered correct when treating existing artworks, where, unlike modes of appreciation, these modes of treatment are taken to be distinctive features of artworks. Levinson's suggestion is that "*a work of art is a thing intended for regard-as-a-work-of-art*: regard in any of the ways *works of art existing prior to it have been correctly regarded*" (Levinson 1979: 234). More formally:

> X is an artwork at t = df X is an object of which it is true at t that some person or persons, having the appropriate proprietary right over X, non-passingly intends (or intended) X for regard-as-a-work-of-art, i.e., regard in any way (or ways) in which art works existing prior to t are or were correctly (or standardly) regarded.
>
> *(Levinson 1979: 238)*

For this idea to have a chance at success, "regard" here has to be read as "regard *as art*," otherwise the fact that most Italian renaissance religious paintings were correctly treated as objects for religious reflection (see Baxandall 1988: 40–56) would entail that anything created now that is intended for religious reflection is a work of art.

A general worry with this kind of proposal is that, like the simple institutional theories the failings of which it is supposed to redress, it is still too parochial. For, at least as understood by Levinson, it restricts artworks to things that are intended for modes of artistic regard enshrined in *our* artistic traditions. A more specific worry in the present context is that, if proposed as a solution to our current concerns, this would seem to *presuppose* an answer to the very question we are trying to resolve. As Alperson's discussion brought out, the kind of regard for which improvisations call is significantly different from the kind of regard for which paradigm artworks, such as musical works, call, and is also significantly different from the kind of regard for which putative artworks, such as performances of classical works, call. But then we may ask why the kind of regard for which an improvisation calls is properly described as "regard-as-a-work-of-art." Lacking any *substantive* characterization of what distinguishes "regard-as-a-work-of-art" from regard-as-something-else, we lack any reason to think that the kind of regard for which improvisations call, as characterized by Alperson, is an example of the former rather than the latter.

We can break out of this circle if we characterize the kind of regard for which artworks call in substantive rather than purely historical terms. Nelson Goodman's proposed "symptoms of the aesthetic" (Goodman 1976: 252–5; 1978: 67–70) offer one option here. What distinguishes artworks from other artifacts, Goodman proposes, are the kinds of symbolic functions they perform, to be captured in terms of a more general theory of symbols. Goodman himself eschews the project of defining what makes something a work of art, limiting himself to the question of *when* the symbolic functions performed by an entity meet his requirements. But we might supplement his account by characterizing arthood not in terms of how something functions but in terms of how its maker(s) *intended* that it function, that is, intended that it fulfill its primary intended purpose, whether the latter itself be aesthetic or more broadly instrumental (religious, political or even pornographic). I have offered such an account elsewhere (e.g., Davies 2011: 3–22), arguing that artworks in general differ from other objects of reflective attention in that they call for a distinctive kind of regard, and do so in virtue of how they articulate the contents bearing upon the performance of their primary intended functions. Abstracting from Goodman's more technical specifications, we might say that determining the artistic contents of an artwork requires that *close attention* be paid to the details of its artistic vehicle, where the latter often *exemplifies* properties ascribable to the work. Artworks tend to articulate their contents by means of many *different properties* of their vehicles, and do so in a "*hierarchical*" manner, where higher-level content is articulated through lower-level content. It is the intention that artworks work through such features that distinguish them from other contentful entities. Artworks, therefore, call

for a distinctive kind of regard if we are to ascertain not only what their vehicles represent, express or exemplify at the most immediate but also at the more thematic level, the point of the vehicles having the manifest features that they do.

If an improvisatory performance like Jarrett's *Köln Concert* is to be viewed as an artwork in virtue of meeting these conditions, Jarrett's improvisational activities on January 24, 1975 wherein a given sonic structure was realized must be the work's artistic vehicle and, for the performance to achieve its intended goals – understood in the ways specified in Section 2 above – we must attend to it in the ways just described. We must pay close attention to the details of the performance whereby the musical manifold is generated, must seek to grasp the overall point of what Jarrett was doing – perhaps a point realized, in part, through exemplification. We must take Jarrett's performance to have been executed with the intention of articulating an artistic content accessible only to receivers who accord it the distinctive kind of regard for which artworks call. Alperson's general characterization of our interest in improvisatory performances provides some indications as to how these requirements might be met. The performance, as an artistic vehicle, articulates its content through the timbral richness of the sequence of sounds produced. The expressive qualities of the latter, and the ways in which they draw upon the different musical traditions to which Jarrett refers in his playing, also serve to communicate higher order content. But we must also attend to features of the performance whereby these qualities are realized, hearing it as exploratory in nature and as produced in real time so that features that might be heard as flaws in a polished performance of a classical work will be heard as contributing to the overall content and point of the work. It is not merely that, in appreciating Jarrett's performance, we must attend both to structural values of the improvised product and to aesthetic features of the improvisational action such as "sensitivity, lyricism, and general virtuosity." Rather, we must attend to the performance as one whose artistic content is intended to be articulated in the very process of generating the improvisational product *through* the improvisational action. Francis Sparshott writes of this:

> When the musician improvises, we make allowances for fluffs, interruptions, squawks, and all sorts of distracting concomitants that we assume to be no part of the performance. But we also allow for his forgetting what he was doing, trying to do two things at once, changing his mind about where he is going, starting more hares than he can chase at once, picking up where he thought he had left off but resuming what was not quite there in the first place, discovering and pursuing tendencies in what he has done that would have taken a rather different form if he had thought of them at the time, and so on.
>
> *(Sparshott 1982: 255)*

But it is not merely that we *overlook or forgive* such "flaws" in an improvised performance. We also attend to the ways in which the performer(s) respond(s) to such things as opportunities for creativity, so that a "mistake" is no longer seen as such in the overall context of the performance (for a very interesting discussion of this phenomenon as an essential part of improvisational performance to which we must attend, see Bertinetto 2016).

And, writing specifically of Jarrett's piece, Corinna da Fonseca-Wollheim (2008) describes the kind of regard required in order to "get" such a performance:

> "The Köln Concert" […] requires an audience that participates in the unfolding act of creation each time anew. Thus the listener becomes involved in the search for a theme's development, shares in the elation when Mr. Jarrett finds a beautiful new tune, experiences the joy of hearing him play with it. When he pauses on a chord, unsure of where to go next, it seems as if much more than the immediate future of this music hangs in the balance. When he shifts to a new key, it feels as if a door has been pushed open, inviting the listener to explore new rooms and hallways.

6 Improvisations as Artworks: An Empiricist Challenge

In developing Alperson's suggestion that improvisations can be artworks because they are *appreciated* in the same ways that *bona fide* artworks are treated, we have sought to undermine Thom's claim, echoed by Kania, that we need to distinguish between artworks and objects of aesthetic contemplation, and categorize improvisational performances as the latter. The engagement with Jarrett's performance, as something intentionally done, that is required if it is to achieve its intended goals parallels the kind of engagement required with an enduring artistic artifact for the achievement of *its* intended goals. If, as I have suggested, it is precisely the need for this kind of engagement that distinguishes works of art from other things, then Thom's distinction seems unmotivated. The *Köln Concert*, like the *View of Delft*, is in a broad sense an artifact that articulates its content in the ways described by Goodman and which, therefore, requires a distinctive kind of regard if it is to achieve its purposes. On the other hand, to engage with something as an "object of aesthetic contemplation" is to prescind from its status as an artifact. The most obvious models of "objects of aesthetic contemplation" are natural phenomena such as landscapes, mountains and perhaps fogs at sea. But once we think of an object of contemplation as something made or done, our interest becomes interrogative. We seek *reasons* rather than natural causes for it being the way that it is. If we are right in our account of what is distinctive of our interest in artworks – namely, a particular kind of interrogative interest in the vehicle whereby its content is articulated – then it is difficult to see why the non-enduring nature of individual performances should be relevant to their status as artworks. That something that we encounter in this way may itself be ephemeral, available only on a particular occasion of reception, may be regrettable, but doesn't seem to have any real bearing on that thing's artistic status.

But, in defending the artistic status of improvisational performances in this way, we must address a different kind of challenge, one that might grant that improvisations can be artworks, but insist that their *being improvisations* plays no part in either their being or being appreciated as such. There is a philosophical tradition that maintains that the history of making an artistic manifold has no bearing on the appreciation of that manifold as the vehicle for an artwork. According to this tradition, it is the "intrinsic" properties of the manifold that are constitutive of the artwork and that are the proper focus of appreciative attention. All artworks, it might be said, are "objects of aesthetic contemplation," but only those "objects of aesthetic contemplation" that are enduring artifacts can be works of art. Even supposing, then, that the sonic structure generated by an improviser such as Jarrett were to possess the intrinsic properties required to be an artwork, the appreciation of that structure *as an artwork* cannot take into account the fact that it is the product of an improvisation.

The philosophers belonging to this tradition share a broadly "empiricist" view of the manner in which artworks are individuated and properly appreciated: everything that bears on the proper appreciation of an artwork is given in an unmediated experiential encounter with the work's artistic vehicle. Such a view of the proper appreciation of works of visual art is expressed in a famous passage in Clive Bell's *Art*: "to those who have and hold a sense of the significance of form, what does it matter whether the forms that move them were created in Paris the day before yesterday or in Babylon fifty centuries ago" (1914: 37). A more salient variation on this view of the being and the being appreciated of artworks can be found in Julian Dodd's recent defense (2007) of what he terms "moderate musical empiricism." Dodd argues that the correct appreciation of a musical work depends only upon what we can hear in a performance of the work, and not upon either the nature of the composer's compositional act or the nature of the performative activities responsible for the sounds we hear. He defends moderate musical empiricism in the context of arguing for an empiricist view of the nature of performable musical works – a view he terms "the type-token theory" – and of how such works are individuated – a view he terms

"timbral sonicism." According to the type-token theory, a musical work is a *norm-type* the tokens of which are sound-sequence events. According to timbral sonicism, such a work is individuated according to the conditions a sound-sequence-event must meet in order to be one of its *properly formed* tokens. These conditions – the set of "properties normative within the work" – are claimed to be wholly acoustic in character, comprising "properties such as *being in 4/4 time*, *ending with a c-minor chord*, and so on" (Dodd 2007: 201) Musical works, for Dodd, are types of sound sequences individuated by reference to "how they sound" in a rich sense that includes not only properties such as pitch, duration, rhythm and accent, but also the timbral qualities that result from the use of particular instrumental means to produce these pitches, etc.

Moderate musical empiricism is defended in arguing for timbral sonicism. It is initially characterized as

> the view that to appreciate a piece of music, we need only use our ears […]. Facts concerning the context in which the piece was composed are of art-historical interest, and perhaps shed light on the extent of the composer's achievement; and facts concerning how the sounds are actually produced enable us to determine the nature of the performer's achievement; but such facts play no role in determining a musical work's aesthetic value.
>
> *(Dodd 2007: 205)*

> The empiricist insists upon a distinction between the aesthetic and the art-historical, so her point is that such contextual factors are of interest, if we are to tell the story of how a composer came to compose works with the character that they have, or to evaluate her achievement in doing so. But the empiricist nonetheless insists that to tell this story is to change the subject from giving an account of the aesthetic value of a composer's works.
>
> *(Dodd 2007: 207)*

For Dodd's "moderate" musical empiricist, musical appreciation is restricted to "what can be heard in the work" by someone who is suitably familiar with the style of music in question and knowledgeable about the "category of art" to which the work belongs. The further claim is that, given moderate musical empiricism as an account of musical appreciation, we should accept timbral sonicism as the right story of how musical works are individuated.

What matters for our purposes here is that someone who accepts moderate musical empiricism as the basis for determining what is involved in appreciating performable musical *works* might propose an analogous account of what is involved in appreciating musical *performances* as artworks. (Whether Dodd would endorse such a view is something to which I shall turn below.) A performance of a musical work, it might be said, is appreciated *as music* purely on the basis of what can be heard in the performance by an appropriately backgrounded listener. Such a listener would not need to be familiar with the structural properties of the performed work because such familiarity bears on the interpretive values of the performance, and these values pertain to the assessment of the *performer* rather than the appreciation of the performance "as music." In the view under consideration, historical details of the performance and of the instruments used will *not* bear upon appreciating the performance *as music*. If a performance of a musical work can be a work of musical art in its own right, it will be such as a token acoustic manifold taken on its own terms.

What, then, would such an empiricist say about the appreciation of a purely *improvised* performance such as Jarrett's if the latter is to be conceived as a musical work or art? Does the appreciator have to know *that the performance is improvised*, and, in the case of an improvisation that uses a frame, that the frame used has a certain nature and origins? If the empiricist's treatment of improvisational performances as works of musical art is to mirror her treatment of performances of a performed work, she must treat the former as a particular token acoustic manifold

to be appreciated aesthetically in virtue of its structural, tonal and related qualities. Knowledge of the historical details of the performance will again be something properly relegated to our appreciation of the performer, rather than to our appreciation of her performance as music. For our empiricist, it would seem, any knowledge of the process generative of a musical performance, including whether, and to what extent, it is improvisational, or what work it is a performance of, is proscribed: a musical performance, just as a musical artwork, is simply an acoustic manifold. Improvisations, then, may be, and may also be appreciated as, artworks in virtue of the structural and aesthetic properties of their perceptible manifolds, but their being improvisations plays no part in that appreciation or in their identity as works: the appreciation of the performance as a work of musical art must prescind entirely from its improvisational nature.

It might be objected that the foregoing ignores an obvious disanalogy between the appreciation, as works of art, of performable musical works through their performances, and the appreciation, as works of art, or performances, improvised or interpretive. For the improvisatory or interpretive activity is surely internal to *the performance* itself, but the context of composition and the use of particular instruments in performing a work are (at least for the empiricist) only art-historically related to the musical work qua structure. Indeed, Dodd himself stresses the importance of a listener's knowledge of the nature of the performative process and of the resources upon which it draws for our appreciation of an improvisation. He writes, of Chick Corea's highly original performance of Ellington's "Sophisticated Lady," that

> crucially, in judging the inventiveness and fruitfulness of this performance, we do not merely evaluate the performance as an autonomous musical event: we consider what Corea does *with the standard*. The success of Corea's performance is not simply a matter of the quality of the improvised music produced by him and his ensemble; it is also determined by the inventiveness with which they use the musical material upon which their improvisation is based. It thus follows that this musical material – the standard – is both *presented* by the performance and something that features in the performance as a model *against which* the performance is judged when we assess the performance's value.
>
> *(Dodd 2014: 283)*

But, in the context of Dodd's moderate musical empiricism, this amounts to the claim that an improvised performance is not appreciated primarily *as music* but as a particular performative event. Recall that Dodd separates our artistic interest in a musical work from our interest in the performers or in the art-historical dimensions of the work. In that context, Dodd's claim that to treat an improvisational performance as *music* is to miss what interests us in it as *a performance* seems tantamount to denying that our interest in an improvisation *as* an improvisation is an interest in it as a work of art or, indeed, as a work of music.

Let me conclude by saying that I think the correct response at this point is to point once again to the parallels, drawn by the Goodmanian approach, between the ways in which a musical work is intended to "work" – to achieve its primary intended function – and the ways in which an improvised performance may be intended to "work." As noted above, it is not simply that in appreciating an improvisation we attend both to the product, as construction, and to the process, as a constructing, for their separate aesthetic qualities. It is the improvisatory performance through which the structure is generated that we must attend to, *as* improvisational, and whose artistic content and overall "point" we must grasp, if we are to correctly engage with what Jarrett is doing. And, finally, to speak to another worry that might trouble the reader, it is for this reason that the question that has occupied us in this chapter – whether improvisations can be works of art – matters: it matters because in addressing it we can better understand how we should engage with an improvisation if it is to achieve its goals.

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11
TRANSFORMATIVE AESTHETICS
When the Unforeseen Emerges

Erika Fischer-Lichte

The concept of transformative aesthetics highlights the transformative power of art. As Nietzsche wrote:

> For art to exist, for any sort of aesthetic activity or perception to exist, a certain physiological precondition is indispensable: *intoxication*. […]. The man in this condition transforms things until they mirror his power – until they are reflections of his perfection. This compulsion to transform into the perfect is – art.
>
> *(Nietzsche 1990: 82 f.)*

Such transformative power is inherent in all genres of art. While Nietzsche focused on the transformation of the artist and described it as intoxication, the recipient, too, is transformed through art, albeit in a different way. Regarding the power of images, for instance, David Freedberg remarked on the relationship between the image and its beholder: "We must consider not only beholders' symptoms and behaviour, but also the effectiveness, efficacy, and vitality of images themselves, not only what beholders do, but also what images appear to do" (Freedberg 1989: xxii). He goes on to assert that the traditional differentiation between images "that elicit particular responses because of imputed 'religious' or 'magical' power and those that are supposed to have purely 'aesthetic' functions" is not "a viable one" (ibid.). Through recourse to a wealth of historical examples, Freedberg demonstrates that this transformative power of images is not restricted to so-called "primitive societies" and their ritualistic contexts because of "magic" but "that it works in all cultures in all times" (Freedberg 1989: xxiii). That is to say, the beholder of an image may undergo an aesthetic experience that results in a particular, even if only temporary, transformation (cf. Belting 2005: 50–8).

Such transformative potential is intrinsic to all art forms – be it poetry, the fine arts, music or the performing arts. However, there is an important difference between the performing arts and all the other genres. While a printed poem or novel, a picture or a sculpture do not change materially over the course of the reception process and its concomitant transformative effect on the reader or beholder, in a performance, all those involved, spectators and actors alike, are affected by what happens during the performance. Whereas a work of art remains materially the same, no matter what kind of response it may trigger in the recipient – except, perhaps, when it is damaged or even destroyed in an act of frenzy as a result of the reception process – a performance necessarily and inevitably changes materially in itself and by it being perceived by the spectators.

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This particular attribute of performances served as the point of departure for Max Herrmann, the founder of *Theaterwissenschaft* (Theatre Studies) in Germany:

> [The] original meaning of theatre refers to its conception as social play – played by all for all. A game in which everyone is a player – actors and spectators alike […]. The spectators are involved as co-players. In this sense, the audience is the creator of the theatre. So many different participants constitute the theatrical event that its social nature cannot be lost. Theatre always produces a social community.
>
> *(Herrmann 1981: 19)*

That is to say that a performance comes into being through the bodily co-presence of "actors" and "spectators." Performances, thus, essentially differ from texts and artifacts. The latter are products that exist separately from their creator(s); they are not tied to the bodily presence of their creators. These artifacts or "products" can be encountered at different times, and often in different places. Each time a person reads a text, looks at a painting or watches a film, they may have a different experience of the same work of art. Yet the materiality of the text, painting or film remains unchanged.

In contrast, a performance has very different *medial conditions*, stemming from its reliance on bodily co-presence.[1] While some of those present – the actors – move through and act in a given space, others – the spectators – perceive their actions and respond to them. These responses can be purely "inward," i.e., imaginative and cognitive processes. But many of their reactions are outwardly perceptible. In a theater performance, for example, spectators can laugh, cheer, sigh, groan, sob, cry, shuffle their feet, shift in their chairs; they cough and sneeze, crumple candy wrappers; they eat and drink; they whisper or comment loudly on the happenings on stage; they yell "bravo" or "da capo," applaud and stomp their feet, or whistle and boo; they stand up noisily, walk out of the auditorium and slam the doors behind them.

Actors and spectators alike perceive these reactions. They feel, hear or see them. In turn, actors and spectators react to these audible responses. The acting might become more or less intense, the actors' voices might become louder and more grating or might pull the spectators in; the actors might feel energized and add gags and other kinds of improvisation. Perceiving the reactions of fellow spectators can also change other spectators' perceptions. Their degree of participation, interest or suspense might grow or lessen, their laughter might intensify considerably or get stuck in their throats. They may start to call each other to order or fight with and insult each other. Whatever the actors do has an effect on the spectators, and whatever the spectators do has an effect on the actors as well as on other spectators.

Performances come into being out of encounters between actors and spectators; I have termed their interplay an "autopoietic feedback loop" (cf. Fischer-Lichte 2008: 38 ff.). Because of it, the performance remains unpredictable and spontaneous to a certain degree.

Of course the actors set crucial parameters for the performance. Its foundation often lies in a given staging concept or set of rules that all the cast members know and follow. Depending on the form of theatre, the genre of performance, the director, stage designer and the actors, the staging may also deliberately plan and create situations that open space for unplanned and unscripted actions, behaviors or occurrences. But even in cases in which the actors meticulously follow a completely predetermined staging plan, they cannot completely control the course of the performance. The reactions of the spectators can give the performance a new twist.

Therefore, it is important to clearly distinguish between the concepts of "mise-en-scène" (German: "Inszenierung") and "performance" (German: "Aufführung"). "Mise-en-scène" refers to the strategies determined in advance to fix the time, duration and manner of the appearance of people, objects and sounds in a space. "Performance" refers to everything that happens during the

staged event – in other words, the totality of the interplay between what happens on stage and the reactions of the spectators. A performance is ultimately created by everyone present and escapes the control of any one individual. In this sense it is contingent. The concept of contingency emphasizes the involvement of all participants and their influence on the course of the performance, including the interplay between these responses and influences. The participants are co-creators who, to different degrees and in different ways, affect the shape of a performance. The interplay of their actions and behaviors constitutes the performance, while the performance constitutes them as actors and spectators. It is only when they take part in a performance that individuals turn into actors and spectators.

Because performances develop through the interplay of everyone involved, they enable participants to experience themselves as subjects acting and affecting others as well as reacting to and being affected by others. As subjects, they are neither fully autonomous nor entirely determined, partaking in and partially responsible for the situations they are engaged in.

In defining the autopoietic feedback loop as one of the most important characteristics of performance – if not *the* most important and decisive one – it follows that, in this respect, the difference between fully scripted and fully improvised performances is subtle and not essential. In fact, improvised performances, particularly those in which spectators are intentionally involved, don't just rely on the feedback loop but find that their entire premise is completely dependent on it. In this sense, they display, or indeed exhibit, the autopoietic feedback loop as the *conditio sine qua non* for their coming into being – for the unforeseen to emerge.

As the terms "improvised" and "improvisational" suggest – both being derived from the Latin *improvisum*, i.e., the unforeseen – an improvised performance is characterized by a high degree of contingency. How it develops is impossible to foresee and predict in advance and remains a mystery for all participants until its very end. This way, it exploits the scope of the autopoietic feedback loop to the full. In such cases, the mutual – or better still, shared – responsibility of performers and spectators regarding the course of the performance (and what it implies) stands out clearly.

In order to make it plausible for improvised performances to be theorized within the same framework as all other performances, so that the criteria of a transformative aesthetics apply, I shall, in the following sections, discuss the other constitutive characteristics of performances, beside the autopoietic feedback loop: its transience, the emergence of meaning and its eventness, examining how they work in staged as well as improvised performances.

1 The Transience of Performance

Performances cannot be contained in or translated into material artifacts. They are *ephemeral and transitory*; they come into being in a continual cycle of waning and becoming; they are collaborative acts of self-creation. Material objects employed in performances remain as their traces. The performance is irretrievably lost when it is finished and cannot be repeated, whereas a production may be designed to be repeated. This is one of the important differences between fully rehearsed and improvised performances. However, in both cases, the performance itself is a unique event. How do we then define the materiality of performance, its spatiality, corporeality and tonality?

Indeed, for hundreds of years there have been certain *spaces* in Europe designed specifically or predominantly for performance. Some are even as old as two millennia. These spaces vary, at times even greatly, in terms of the ways they encourage or even prescribe the positioning of the actors and spectators. Many of them still exist and can be visited; in fact, they can still be used as sites of performance. Their layout and the division between stage and auditorium open particular possibilities for the movements of the actors on stage as well as the perception of the spectators, partly even organizing and structuring them, and influencing the relationship between both parties. Whatever

use is made of these possibilities – how they are realized, avoided or thwarted – co-constitutes the performance space. Every single movement of people, each object, lighting choice or sound can change it. It shifts constantly. The *spatiality* is created in, through and as the performance space and is perceived under the conditions set by the space. This is of particular importance in performances that use a bare stage, as is quite often the case in improvised performances. The bare stage even highlights the transience of the performance, the process of its permanent re-creation and redefinition with the help of the special uses made of the performance space.

Moreover, performances have increasingly moved away from conventional spaces such as theater buildings or other art institutions. Historically as well as in present times, public squares or street corners could be turned into venues for performances. The same holds true for churches, woods or even cemeteries, to name just a few options. The spatiality that comes into being follows from the special use performers and spectators make of these spaces, a use that changes them with every action.

Another factor contributing to and highlighting the transience of space are atmospheres. As the German philosopher Gernot Böhme explains, atmospheres are placeless but can fill a space. They belong neither to the objects that nor to the people who seem to emanate them, but usually are the first thing a spectator/visitor senses. The atmosphere enables a specific experience of the space and creates a particular spatiality. According to Böhme, atmospheres are "spaces insofar as they are affected by the presence of things, people, or the environmental surroundings and their ecstasies. They are themselves spheres of presence of these things, of their reality in space" (Böhme 1995: 33).

The "ecstasy of things," i.e., the way a thing presents itself to someone, captures the attention of the perceiver. Different lighting, a shift in sound design or a smell can abruptly and powerfully change the atmosphere. This way, the atmosphere reveals the transience of spatiality – they are transient *per se*.

The transience of *corporeality* is immediately apparent. Whatever actors do does not last beyond the moment of enactment. Unlike painters, sculptors, poets, composers and filmmakers, actors, singers and dancers do not create a permanent "work" separate from themselves. Whatever they create is fleeting and transitory, and is created out of a unique material: their own bodies or, as the philosopher Helmuth Plessner puts it, "the material of their own existence" (Plessner 1982: 407). Regarding this aspect, there is no difference between a staged and an improvised performance. The human body is a unique aesthetic material: it is a living organism, always in a state of becoming, that is, it is in a continual process of transformation. With every breath and every movement, the body creates itself anew. Bodily being-in-the-world, not *being* but *becoming,* contradicts the concept of the artwork as a product. A human body can only become an artwork as a corpse. A living body rejects all attempts to turn it into an artwork. It is a material that constantly re-creates itself anew.

However, the human body can be understood as material only to a certain extent. As Plessner demonstrates, there exists a doubleness with regard to the body. On the one hand, people *have* a body they can manipulate as they can any other object, it can be instrumentalized and used as a sign for something else. On the other hand, people *are* their body; people are embodied subjects. Plessner sees this particularity as the foundation of the *conditio humana* – the distancing of a person from her/himself. When actors step outside themselves in order to portray a figure through the "material of their own existence," they emphasize this doubling and the distancing of people from themselves. There is a tension between the actor's phenomenal body – their bodily being-in-the-world – and the use of that body as a representation, a sign to portray a character or something else. In Plessner's view, this tension infuses the actor's actions in the performance with deep anthropological meaning and dignity. One can describe this tension as occurring between the "phenomenal body" and the "semiotic body."

This tension has been discussed in European theories on acting since the 18th century. It is characteristic of all forms of performance in which actors/performers use their body in order to

represent something else – be it a "character," an animal, an object, an allegory or something else. In each of these theories, the relationship between both the phenomenal and the semiotic body has been described and defined differently. Since the 1960s, Fluxus and other performance movements have tried again and again to overpower the tension between the phenomenal and semiotic body by refusing to portray fictional characters in fictional worlds. They focused on the phenomenal body as such, while also creating it anew with every action. Yet this did not necessarily stop spectators from ascribing meaning to the artist's phenomenal body and her/his action.

This tension between the phenomenal and the semiotic body might be diffused by introducing the concept of *embodiment*, as already been defined by Thomas Csordas in the 1990s. He defined *embodiment* as the "existential ground of culture and self" (Csordas 1994: 6). His point of departure is the dualism between mind and body, which the concept of embodiment is meant to overcome. The mind has to be conceived of as embodied. Thus, the concept of embodiment refers to these fleeting bodily processes through which the phenomenal body constitutes itself in its particularity and creates specific meanings. Actors present their phenomenal bodies in a particular manner, so that they are experienced as *present* and simultaneously as *representing* someone or something else. Through a special process of embodiment, both presence and the represented are created. Neither presence nor the represented exist outside of the performance.

The term *presence* as I use it here implies three different meanings: First, it refers to the plain being of the performer's phenomenal body. This I call the *weak concept of presence*. There is another form of presence that allows the performer to control the performance space and captivate the attention of the spectators. They feel a power emanating from the performer that focuses their attention completely on her/him. They experience the performer as present in an unusually intense way. This might be termed the *strong concept of presence*. Such strategies of embodiment create a circulating energy that affects the spectators and produces an energetic response from them. They will feel present in the here and now. This seems particularly relevant for improvisational performances, which often fundamentally rely on energetic and creative responses from the audience. Such improvisational performances require the willingness and openness of spectators to experience others and themselves as *embodied minds,* strongly present in the here and now. This is what I term the *radical concept of presence*. It emerges when a performer brings forth their phenomenal body and its energy, so that they appear as an *embodied mind*. In the presence of the performer, the spectators experience both self and other as an *embodied mind*. The circulating energy is perceived as a transformative power. In this case, the autopoietic feedback loop can be described as the energy brought forth by the performers and spectators, circulating in the space and felt by everybody. The energetic exchange between performers and spectators affects everyone present and, thus, creates the performance – no matter whether it is staged/planned/rehearsed or improvised.

The transience of a performance is epitomized by its *tonality*. One can hardly imagine anything that would be more fleeting than sound. Emerging from silence, sound exposes and fills the space, only to fade and disappear in the next moment. Yet its impact on the listener is immediate and fundamental. Sound conveys a sense of space, it penetrates the body and has a physiological and affective impact: listeners may tremble and breathe more quickly; their hearts might beat faster; they may succumb to melancholia or become euphoric; they may be seized by desire or haunted by memories.

Sound creates spatiality as well as corporeality. Through the performers' voices, all three forms of materiality – spatiality, corporeality and tonality – come into being. The voice is produced by the body and resonates through space so that it becomes audible for the singer/speaker as well as for the listeners. The close relationship between body and voice is especially evident in screams, sighs, moans, sobs and laughter. These utterances are unmistakably created through a process that affects the whole body: it bends or contorts. These non-verbal utterances also impress themselves physically onto the listeners. The screaming, sobbing or laughing voice penetrates the bodies of the listeners, echoes in and is absorbed by their bodies.

Quite generally there might arise a tension between voice and language that is analogous to the tension between phenomenal body and semiotic body. Both these spring from the doubleness of *being* a body and *having* a body.

Summarizing the comments on the materiality of performance, we can conclude that, in this respect, there is no decisive difference between staged/rehearsed and improvised performances. The above comments apply to all kinds of performances.

Let us now take a closer look at the *emergence of meaning* in a performance. If we proceed from the assumption that the bodily co-presence of performers and spectators is constitutive of performance and that performance is a transient phenomenon, it follows that performances are unable to convey any meaning that is determined in advance. Instead, all meaning only emerges over the course of the performance and differs for each of the participants. It is impossible to know beforehand what kind of meaning individual participants are going to generate. The interaction between performers and spectators can always take an unexpected turn and disturb the planned program. This applies to all kinds of performances. However, it is constitutive and particularly relevant to improvised performances. Here performers and spectators are both constantly involved in the process of bringing forth new meaning. It is particularly interesting with regard to improvisational performances that performers *and* spectators are both asked to produce meaning. Performers must make sense of the inputs by spectators and spectators must make sense of the responses of the performers.

Perceiving bodies and objects on stage in their specific presence does not mean perceiving them as meaningless. Rather, all these phenomena are perceived as *something*. They are not simply stimuli or sensory data, but rather the perception of *something as something*. In the perception of the spectator things appear in a performance in their particular phenomenality; in this sense we could say that their appearance *is* their meaning. The perception of something as something *simultaneously* constitutes meaning as part of a process that manifests its specific phenomenal being.

Furthermore, the appearance of a phenomenon is the prerequisite for another mode of perception and a different way of generating meaning. The moment performers and spectators cease to focus their attention on the phenomenal being of the perceived, they begin to perceive it as a signifier; that is, as a sign-bearer that is linked with associations – fantasies, memories, emotions, thoughts – with what it signifies, i.e., possible meanings. The associations conjured by an object, a gesture, a sound or a light cue depend on the individual experiences of the participants and their knowledge as well as their specific sensitivities. This includes factors such as age, gender, class and cultural background, which impact how people perceive and understand performance. It would be naïve to believe that perception and the constitution of meaning depend only on what is presented and how it is presented. Instead, both are also if not primarily rooted in the specific conditions that each participating subject brings to the performance. Perception and the concomitant chain of associations produced by it differ for each individual. It is also doubtful that these sorts of associations follow specific rules and are predictable for everyone. Instead, they arise spontaneously.

We might call the oscillation of perception between concentrating on phenomena in their self-referentiality and on the associations that they trigger the *perceptual order of presence* versus the *perceptual order of representation*. The body of the performer as bodily being-in-the-world and the objects in their phenomenal being create the foundation for the order of presence. Perceiving a body or object as a sign – for example, as a dramatic character and her/his environment – is the foundation of the perceptual order of representation. While the first order of perception (i.e., presence) focuses on meaning as tied to the phenomenal being, the second creates meaning that comprehensively constitutes, for instance, the character and the fictive world.

These two perceptual orders generate meaning according to different principles. When one of the orders becomes the dominant one, it affects how spectators perceive a performance. This again applies to staged/planned/rehearsed performances as well as to improvised ones. This means that in every performance, the perception of each participant oscillates between different modes

of perception. The more often these oscillations occur, the more participants will feel like wanderers between two worlds. This creates a state of instability that the participants experience as an in-between or liminal state. Participants can and will constantly but unsuccessfully attempt to reset their perception and become aware that the oscillation between the two modes of perception is out of their control. In effect, they are caught between these two orders. They experience their own perception as emergent, wrested from their control, inaccessible but also conscious. The oscillation draws the attention of the participants to the dynamic process of perception itself. The generation of meaning becomes less and less predictable but dependent on the course of the performance.

We can conclude at this point that performances – be they staged or improvised – cannot be labeled works of art but must instead be seen as *art events*. Their particular aestheticity is realized in their *eventness*. The performance as an aesthetic event is characterized by the following features:

- A performance can be seen as an event rather than an artwork because it is created through the interaction of actors and spectators (i.e., an autopoietic feedback loop). This autopoietic process *is* the process of the performance. When it ends, the performance is over and irretrievably lost. In other words, the autopoietic process and the performance are not results or artifacts, but events. Because they are jointly brought forth by actors and spectators, both parties bear the responsibility for how it unfolds.
- As an event, a performance – in contrast to a *mise-en-scène* – is unique and unrepeatable. Any particular constellation of actors and spectators is singular. The reactions of the spectators and their effect on the performers and other spectators will differ from performance to performance. This seems obvious with regard to improvised performances. Yet it applies just as well to stagings in which actions are pre-planned.
- A performance is an event insofar as no individual participant is able to control it completely. This is so not only because of the bodily co-presence of performers and spectators, but also because of the specific mode of presence through which phenomena emerge and how meaning is constituted from these phenomena. To the extent that phenomena appear present in especially intense ways, they disconnect from their context and appear to exist in and for themselves. The phenomena occur for those who perceive them; their perception *happens* to them. The perceiving subject is caught in that oscillation between two different orders of perception and enters a state of liminality.

Proceeding from this summary, I shall return to the question of transformation. For the eventness of performance opens up a very specific experience for all participants. They experience themselves as subjects who partially control and are partially controlled by the performance's conditions – they are neither fully autonomous nor fully determined by others. They experience the performance as an aesthetic, a social and often even a political process in which relationships are negotiated, power struggles fought out and communities emerge and vanish. Concepts and ideas that are traditionally regarded as dichotomous in the European aesthetic discourse – such as autonomy vs. determinism, aesthetics vs. politics, presence vs. representation – are experienced not in the mode of *either/or* but as *not only, but also*. Oppositions collapse.

Such a collapse of dichotomies draws the participants' attention to the threshold. S/he experiences instability and the dissolution of boundaries as part of the event. This opens up the liminal space between poles such as presence and representation, and allows a feeling of in-betweenness to take over. I call such liminal experiences enabled by performances "aesthetic experiences." That is to say, an aesthetic experience has the potential to transform those who go through it.

During the performance, performers and spectators may enter a state of alienation that is potentially disorienting, one that can be enjoyable as well as agonizing. They may experience a wide range of transformations. This is especially true of temporary transformations that last for part

or the entire duration of the performance. These include individual changes in the physiological, affective, energetic and motor states of the body; shifts in the status of actors and spectators – particularly in improvised performances – or the creation of a community either solely of the spectators or of actors and spectators. These changes take place over the course of the performance, but often do not extend beyond its conclusion. Participants might dismiss their temporary destabilization as meaningless. However, they also might remain in a state of disorientation for an extended period and only upon later reflection come to a new orientation – or they may even return to their previous values and patterns of behavior. In that case, the transformation would have just been temporary. Regardless of the outcome, those involved experience their participation in the performance as a state of liminality, which might lead to a transformation.

The concept of performance as explained above (and in more detail in Fischer-Lichte 2008) applies to all kinds of performances. It would not make much sense to develop another concept with regard to improvised performances, for the difference between them does not question the concept of performance as outlined above. Rather, it merely consists of the degree of the unforeseen that appears over the course of the performance.

2 The Emergence of the Unforeseen in Performance: A Historical Overview

In the second part of my paper I shall discuss this degree of the unforeseen through recourse to examples from the history of professional theater in the German-speaking countries. This history begins with the guest tours of Italian commedia dell'arte troupes around the middle of the 16th century. Some of the first documented commedia dell'arte performances were staged as part of the wedding of Crown Prince Wilhelm of Bavaria and Princess Renée of Lorraine, celebrated in Munich in February 1568. Two major fresco cycles, featuring 48 scenes on the walls of the so called *Narrentreppe* (Fools' Staircase) and on the ceiling frieze of Wilhelm's study in Castle Trausnitz, provide an impressive visual documentation of these performances. Commedia dell'arte troupes remained popular in German-speaking countries until the middle of the 18th century (cf. Trautmann 1887; Schindler 2004; Martino 2010; Katritzky 2018).

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the avant-gardists have hailed commedia dell'arte as the epitome of improvised theatre. However, it would be more accurate to say that these performances mainly consisted of ready-made components that were adapted to the situation at hand. For one, there are the stock characters that raise specific expectations. Moreover, the scenarios known to us today (cf. Hulfeld 2014) rather clearly convey the storyline or plot that is to be narrated. They list the characters involved in the scene as well as the actions they will carry out. Even other independent routines – so-called *pezzi chiusi* – are listed in the scenarios, such as dances, lazzi, different kinds of trickeries (*baie* and *burle*), special scenes, triumphal scenes, brawls, make-believe actions, games, etc. (cf. Hulfeld 2018). Since each company had a particular repertoire of plays, we can assume that not only the actions but also the words the actors used were variations of the same pattern. Moreover, they relied, sometimes even heavily, on the literature they consulted (cf. Vescovo 2018).

While the performances of commedia dell'arte troupes were restricted to the princely and royal courts in German-speaking countries, English companies, which had toured these regions since 1585, performed at courts as well as in towns. Initially, these performances were in English. Soon, however, the Fool, Clown or Jester began to address the audience in German. It can be assumed that he did so following a certain type of speech that could be easily adapted to each situation. It is also very likely that the actors – first the English ones and later also the German members of these troupes – did not stick to the text as it was written down but used it as a baseline, so that there was ample space for improvised words and actions. This would have been true especially for the Clown, for his role was to keep in touch with the spectators.

Since the livelihood of these companies and of the German ones founded after the end of the Thirty Years War depended on their success with audiences, it follows that their greatest concern was to please the spectators and not to be "true to the text." Whenever the audience began to display signs of disinterest or boredom, the actors had to invent something new to recapture their attention. Here one can see clearly that, in improvisational performances, the performers must also be spectators; in fact, they must even behave like spectators and the audience, too, expects them to behave like spectators. They must show that they perceive what the audience is doing and demanding. The ability to improvise was key to keeping the autopoietic feedback loop alive and to direct it in favor of the actors. The degree of improvisation in the words and actions of the performers, thus, would have varied not just from company to company but also within the same company, depending on the responses of the audiences. It is a common belief that by the end of the 1730s the director Friederike Caroline Neuberin (1697–760) had already tried to introduce tougher curbs on improvisation. In his novel *Wilhelm Meisters Theatralische Sendung* (1777–85), Goethe introduced a theater director named Madame de Retti, who was likely modeled on Neuberin. Here, Madame de Retti complains:

> How sorry I am […] that we banished improvisations, I regretted a hundred times that I was partly to blame; this is not to say that we should have kept the old smuttiness and performed decent plays alongside. But if we had continued to improvise just once a week, the actors would have stayed in practice and the spectators would have continued to enjoy it, and we could have benefited from this in many ways, for improvisation is the school and the touchstone of the actor. The point was not to learn a role by heart and believe that this would suffice in order to perform it, but through improvisation, spirit, lively imagination, dexterity, knowledge of the theatre and presence of mind emerged at its clearest; the actor was forced to acquaint himself with all the resources of the theatre and he became quite comfortable, like a fish in water, and a poet talented enough to need these tools would also have made a great impact on the audience. But I allowed myself to get carried away by the critics, because I was serious and did not enjoy antics and farces and was happy to play Chimène, Rodogune, Zaïre or Mérope. I thought myself and my troupe too posh to merely entertain the spectators as we had done before. I cast out the Hanswurst, buried the Harlequin.
>
> *(Goethe 1977: 608 f.)*

Reading this, one might be led to believe that Goethe himself was in favor of improvisation, which was still a common practice for many companies even at the end of the 18th century, when Goethe took over the directorship of the Weimar Court Theatre (1791–817). Yet as far as we know, he restricted improvisation to rehearsals and tried hard to turn the performance into a "work of art"– to be changed by neither the actors nor the spectators. He not only introduced lengthy rehearsal periods, deciding on and finalizing each and every gesture, action and pronunciation but also tried to control the response of the spectators. He had a policeman standing at one door, who, if Goethe gave him a sign, would remove from the auditorium any spectator who behaved "inappropriately." He himself was seated in the middle of the first row and, whenever he disapproved of the audience's response, he would turn around and reprimand those spectators for their behavior. His words "Man lache nicht!" ("There shall be no laughter!") – meant to make clear that laughter at that particular moment was inappropriate – have become proverbial. In fact, his interventions, aimed at steering the course of the autopoietic feedback loop, became part of it.

In Goethe's view, theater was not meant to entertain the spectators. In his essay *The Weimar Court Theatre,* written in 1802 as an explanation for the new theater aesthetics that derived from it, Goethe stated:

> […] the spectator should learn to perceive that not every play is like a coat, which must be tailored precisely according to his own current needs, shape, and size. We should not think of satisfying our actual spiritual, emotional, and sensual needs in the theatre, but we should instead see ourselves as travellers who visit foreign places and lands, to which we travel for the sake of learning and delight, and where we do not find all those comforts which we have at home to shape our own individual needs.
>
> *(Goethe 1802: 83)*

This new aesthetics were meant to help the spectators attain *Bildung*, i.e., developing the art of self-cultivation. Their emotions and reflections were to be balanced so that they could unfold their potential to the fullest, while also maintaining their freedom. Goethe's new theater aesthetics were not meant to grip the spectator by triggering pity, empathy or any other form of identification. Rather, it was meant to allow them a "disinterested and free pleasure," as Kant had put it (Kant 2000: 95), through which they could contribute to their own *Bildung*. This was the transformation Goethe had in mind. The spectators, however, did not conform to his ideas. They still wanted to get involved, to be recognized and perceived by the actors, and be entertained. Goethe might have had control over the actors, but, despite the policeman, could not fully command the spectators and steer their responses.

It seems that a number of theater directors followed the example set by Goethe, as we can infer from the following anecdote conveyed in 1811 by Heinrich von Kleist (1953):

> Herr Unzelmann, who has been performing guest roles in Königsberg for some time now, seems to enjoy great popularity with the audience, which is key, of course. Yet he seems to have trouble with the critics (as one can tell from reading the Königsberger Zeitung) and the director. They say the director has forbidden him to improvise. Herr Unzelmann, who dislikes any form of rebellion, fell in line; but when a horse, brought to the stage as part of the play, decided to drop dung right there on the floorboards, much to the dismay of the audience, he suddenly turned to the horse and, interrupting his speech, said: "Didn't the director forbid you to improvise?" – We were assured that even the director had a good laugh about that.
>
> *(Kleist 1953: 270)*

As the anecdote suggests, improvisation continued, if not always in accordance with the ideas of the directors, but mostly to the delight of the spectators. In fact, even at the end of the 19th century, spectators still contributed to performances in many ways. Gerhart Hauptmann's play *The Weavers*, for example, was not allowed to be performed at first. It was censored because the authorities were afraid that it "would serve as a magnet for drawing in that part of Berlin's population which has social-democratic leanings and is inclined to demonstrate" (Archive of the Police Commissioner of Berlin, Volumes 1–2, quoted in Brauneck 1974: 55). Hauptmann's solicitor argued that Berlin's unemployed could by no means afford the high prices at the Deutsches Theater, which, therefore, was visited "largely only by members of those social circles […] that are not given to violence and other disturbances of the public order" (verdict of the Prussian Higher Administrative Court of October 2, 1893, quoted in Schwab-Felisch 1959: 247).

The following day, on October 3, 1893, permission was granted to stage the play. However, at the premiere at the Deutsches Theater on September 25, 1894, the middle-class and partly even the upper-class spectators sided with the exploited weavers in an unexpected way:

> In the blink of an eye, that intimate connection between audience and stage had been established that turned these sharply divided halves of the house into a unity and the spectators,

> by way of their feelings, practically into co-actors of this wild drama taking place in front of them. Just as the spirit of the mob presides over a riotous people's gathering, which can also take hold of calm personalities, as one has observed in rebels, so that otherwise uninvolved, neutral parties are seized by a frenzy and join in wild deeds, here at least a part of the audience could be seen cheering for the crazed acts of destruction happening on stage. Cheers from the heights of the auditorium encouraged the rabble plundering the salon of the factory owner to double their efforts. And when the curtain fell after the scene, the frenetic applause that went on and on made it difficult to say whether their enthusiasm was caused by the poetic-scenic staging or by the deeds themselves.
>
> (Friedrich Dernburg in *Berliner Tagesblatt*, September 26, 1894: quoted in Praschek 1981)

Here, the autopoietic feedback loop operated in a way that the spectators contributed to the performance with a number of improvised actions, which nobody could have foreseen.

The historical avant-garde movements as well as the theater and performance art of the last decades have opened up ample space for improvisation and related opportunities for the unforeseen to happen. The line between planned/rehearsed and improvised performances has become increasingly blurred. Even if one defines improvised performances as a "play/game with processes of the social construction of reality" (Lösel 2013: 259), this is, on the one hand, covered by the concept of performance, and, on the other, it also applies to non-improvised performances. Because of the functioning of the autopoietic feedback loop, the aesthetic and the social intertwine in every single performance. A performance takes place as an aesthetic and, at the same time, as a social construction of reality. Taking part in this process of "construction" or "creation" or to play with it, always implies the possible occurrence of a liminal experience for those involved, which bears the power of transformation.

We can, of course, identify a number of differences between planned/rehearsed and improvised performances. However, in terms of the *concept of performance* as explained above and from the point of view of *transformative aesthetics*, it does not make much sense to posit a fundamental difference between planned and improvised performances.

When we focus on the functioning of the autopoietic feedback loop, it becomes clear that, because of the joint responsibility of the actors and spectators for the proceeding of the performance, we have to take into consideration not just the aesthetic and social but also the ethical dimension. Many of Marina Abramović's pieces focus on this latter dimension and, in doing so, she emphasizes the unforeseen that can happen in performances. In *Rhythm 0* at Galleria Moria in Naples (1974), for instance, she invited in a group of people from the street and encouraged them to torture her at their own will. The following year, in *Lips of Thomas* (1975) at the Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck, the artist violated herself severely so that blood welled out of the cuts of several parts of her naked body. Both performances were a challenge to the artist as well as to the spectators, who were caught in a dilemma on how to respond. As long as they just watched, they were behaving "aesthetically," which in this case meant taking a voyeuristic, even sadistic stance. When spectators decided to put an end to Abramović's ordeal, as some did at both performances, they behaved "ethically" by stopping her from being violated by herself or others, but they also behaved "unethically" since they were interfering in "her" performance and bringing it to an end – without knowing whether this was according to or against the wishes of the artist. The ethically motivated interference in the performance – as a particular kind of improvisation – did not bring about a new turn within the performance, but, rather, its end, while the unethical, improvised violation of the artist by others (*Rhythm O*) kept the performance going. Both performances can be regarded as experiments on the relationship between the "aesthetic" and the "ethical" – on ethical interventions (improvised actions) that ended the performance, and unethical, improvised actions that kept the performance going and assigned to the spectators the role of voyeurs. They

were reflections on the relationship between the aesthetic, the social and the ethical dimension of performance and the conflicts that may result from it. By the same token, these performances provoked the unfolding of the unforeseen.

Note

1 The following explanation of the concept of performance draws on the theory of performance I developed in Fischer-Lichte (2008).

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12

IMPROVISATION AS SPONTANEOUS CREATION VERSUS "MAKING DO"

Andy Hamilton

The value of improvisation in music is philosophically contested; before the mid-20th century, it was often denigrated. For Hanslick, improvisation imposed an "irrelevant and distracting wash of emotion [...] a musical product typically devoid of beauty" (Alperson 1984: 17). Dutton reiterated a common view that no jazz improvisation could "compare favorably (or even remotely) with the structural complexity of any of Beethoven's late quartets" (Alperson 1984: 22). In contrast, Hegel's *Aesthetics* described "the quite peculiar attraction" of extempore performance: "we have […] before us not merely a work of art but the actual production of one" (Hegel 1975: 957 – end of Ch. 2 of "The Romantic Arts"). However, the concept of improvisation or extemporization does not exist in a historical vacuum. One cannot assess such claims without asking, what do these writers understand by improvisation or extemporization? How should these concepts be defined in historical context?

I have addressed the latter question in a series of articles that present and defend an "aesthetics of imperfection." The term was coined by Ted Gioia and is associated by him with improvised music (Gioia 1988). I have argued that the aesthetics applies to all musical performance, and recently developed my argument as follows:

1 The aesthetics of imperfection involves a positive sense of imperfection, an *open, spontaneous response to contingencies of performance or production*, aiming to create something positive from apparently unpromising as well as promising circumstances. It involves reacting positively to idiosyncratic instruments, apparent errors, or failings in performance, decline with age or infirmity, and so on. Mistakes are treated as a source of material, not a source of embarrassment. Perfectionists, in contrast, advocate a planning model not readily modified in the face of such contingencies – which are to be tolerated at best, not exploited. It follows that:
2 An aesthetics of imperfection is not, as Gioia assumes, a negative one that simply tolerates errors and imperfections. It is a positive aesthetic, illustrated by the Japanese concept – or concepts – of *wabi-sabi*. Imperfections can become new styles or kinds of perfection – and so true imperfectionism is a *constant striving for new contingencies to respond to*.
3 There is a subtle, complex relation between composition and improvisation, in which both have *broad* and *narrow senses*. Narrow sense composition is the production of works, usually notated; broad sense composition is putting things together in an aesthetically effective form. Thus *improvisation is a* (broad-sense) *compositional method*. There is no music that is not composed, in a broad sense.

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4 Improvisation and composition are interdependent concepts and practices; both involve structure and spontaneity. Thus, improvisations aspire to be compositions (narrow sense), while interpretations of compositions aim to create the illusion that the composition is as spontaneously-created as an improvisation. In a strict sense, improvisation in music arose with the composer-performer divide; the composer became a desk-worker rather than performer, their compositions defined by the score. But Derek Bailey rightly comments that "improvisation is present to some degree in almost all musical activities" (1993: 66); as Nettl argues, "all performers improvise to some extent" (1974: 19).

5 Imperfectionism is an *aesthetics of performance* – of compositions as well as improvisations. Improvisation is no riskier, or prone to mistakes, than the performance of compositions. Mistakes in performance of notated works include contravention of the score, such as playing wrong notes; "mistake" in improvisation can only mean what is unintended. Thus, commentators are wrong to assume that the perfection/imperfection debate concerns the merits of improvisation versus composition. Gioia's concept of imperfection, associated with jazz and improvised music, should be extended to all kinds of musical performance (Gioia 1988; Hamilton 2000).

In this chapter, I wish to focus on the senses of *improvisation* briefly elucidated in my precursor article (Hamilton 2020a). Section 1 examines the development of improvisation, intimately connected with that of the composer-performer divide. Two senses of composition are defined. *Narrow-sense composition* is the production of works, usually notated; *broad-sense composition* means putting things together in an aesthetically pleasing form. Thus *improvisation can be a method of (broad-sense) composition*. It follows that there is no improvisation without composition (broad-sense), and very little (narrow-sense) composition without improvisation (the only exception being electronic music that is "sounded" rather than performed).

Section 2 relates these distinctions to the contrast between broad and narrow senses of improvisation. Broad sense improvisation is *spontaneous creation*. Under this heading is spontaneous creation using an established method, as well as spontaneous creation involving "making do," which has artistic and non-artistic manifestations – the artistic kind that people revel in and the practical kind that is forced on one rather than chosen and which is a nuisance at best and a catastrophe at worst. I relate this contrast to Lydia Goehr's distinction between improvisation *extempore* and improvisation *impromptu*. *Extempore* is when musicians make up music in performance, she argues. *Impromptu* "refers to what we do […] when we're put *on the spot* […] confronted with an unexpected difficulty or obstacle," Goehr writes. The latter concept, she argues, can be used to "re-release the power of the work-concept"; I argue that this is achieved not by improvisation *impromptu*, but by the aesthetics of imperfection, which is an aesthetic of performance, and not of improvisation alone. I conclude by arguing that while the concept of improvisation extends beyond artistic practice, it has a key role within art, in the sense of "making do" or self-limitation.

Section 3 looks at works and performances, defending a middle way between the mechanical reproduction view – which, as Goehr rightly comments, is still often assumed if not affirmed – and "performance as composition." This middle way recognizes that *interpretation is an artistic, not a reproductive process* that may involve improvisation. My concern here, and elsewhere, is with the philosophically neglected relation of performance and entertainment, rather than the ontology of art. I argue that the concept of *performance* involves addressing an audience and, thus, forms a holism with improvisation and composition. I conclude by relating the notion of performance to the contrast between art and entertainment.

1 The Development of Improvisation: Two Senses of Composition, and "Improvisation as a Compositional Method"

In this section, I qualify the traditional modernist story of the development of the work-concept and the decline of what is usually called improvisation. My qualification involves distinguishing broad and narrow senses of composition. The broad sense is putting things together in an aesthetically rewarding form; the narrow sense is the more familiar notion associated with the desk-working composer. One can then define improvisation as a (broad-sense) compositional method.

The contemporary Western concept of musical composition arises from the *composer-performer divide*, which developed in Western music over a period of centuries during the medieval era, along with staff notation.[1] *The composer* became a desk-worker rather than performer, their compositions defined by the score. Prior to this divide, one could say, all European musicians were performers of their own work, and perhaps that of others – troubadours might have played each other's songs. Scholars of medieval church music debate whether there existed even a limited canon of non-contemporary works – the canon, and associated work-concept, evolved only with the composer becoming a desk-worker.

It is debated when the musical *work-concept* appeared – though perhaps what that concept is has not been sufficiently debated. Most musicologists allow that the musical work-concept emerged at some point during the past five hundred years, while disagreeing on its exact dating. In *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works,* Goehr argued that the work-concept crystallized around 1800 (Goehr 1992). However, Steingo (2014: 82) is right to insist that we need a plural definition of the musical work that involves related concepts and practices – rather than holding, with Goehr, to a relatively fixed date of appearance. There seems to be a consensus on the features involved in the work-concept:

a growing reliance on the score
b compositional (or authorial) control
c repeatability, permanence (development of a canon)
d artistic autonomy as a European ideology.

Music notation, from being secondary to musical performance, came to be regarded as the manifestation of a work (Steingo 2014).

Those features require elucidation, however. In providing this, I assume the familiar modernist story to be true, while also qualifying it. "Work" in musical work means "Artwork," with a capital "A" – *autonomous art in a public arena*, normally with a unique, named creator, arising within a *modern system of the arts*, and involving an overarching concept of art (Hamilton 2007a: Ch. 1). In the pre-Renaissance West and non-Western cultures, art is generally non-autonomous – subsidiary to non-artistic activities, be they religious, military, or social. Paintings, sculptures, and music now regarded as artworks, were not so regarded at the time of their production.[2] According to the modernist story, the work-concept expressed Western music's *increasing portability* – the repeatability of compositions in different locations and times, by different performers, involving their standardization as works. When Bach was Kapellmeister at Köthen, he wrote for a particular location and set of performers, without giving thought of portability; performers were expected to embellish and elaborate. His compositions *became* works. A work, strictly understood, may be inspired by or commissioned for a particular occasion, or particular performers, but is not limited in performance by this. There are obvious parallels with developments in other arts, related to art's growing autonomy and its commodification – such as the portability of framed paintings.

As the work-concept evolved, the nature of the score changed. It is important to understand that the score was originally a mnemonic. As Stephanie Cant writes:

> The Urtext revolution […] gives the impression that somehow the score is the work […]. However, composers wrote down only what they needed to write down for performers who were their contemporaries – and often known to them – to grasp the essence of the music which they had created […]. Our Western system of notation, for all its apparent sophistication and accuracy, still involves elements of mnemonic.
>
> *(Cant 2021: 161)*

She cites her own experience as a composer:

> When one imagines […] a tune or a rhythm in one's head or maybe with one's fingers, and one wants to notate it, the timing/feel cannot be completely captured by the resources of rhythmic notation, even if the pitches are accurate. But when one comes back to it, what one has written reminds one of the original musical thought.
>
> *(Cant 2021: 161)*

The development of the work-concept, with its requirement of portability, undermined the mnemonic aspect. (Our current attitude to performances with the living composer's imprimatur shows the conflicting impulses at work.)

As the familiar story stresses, with the development of the work-concept came a decline in what is now called improvisation. Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven were great improvisers; in early 19th-century Europe, professional keyboard-players and composers – and many amateurs – were trained to improvise. As composers' authority became dominant after the mid-19th century, a Romantic *ideal* of improvisation supplanted its public performance – as Gooley argues, composers improvised in private, but "improvisation" acquired pejorative connotations of lack of discipline or planning, reflecting the sense discussed below, in which it is contrasted with "using an established method" (Gooley 2018). As composers wrote more elaborately, orchestrating for larger ranges of colors and sounds, scores became increasingly prescriptive, limiting performer input – though any system of notation requires interpretation. Classical musicians, up to the present, have continued to improvise in the organ-loft, in schools, and for dancers – activities underpaid and under-appreciated.

That, at least, is the familiar story, interestingly developed by Gooley. To reiterate, I do not reject it, but qualify it by questioning how one should describe the situation before the composer-performer divide took root. (In Section 3, I pursue the question of the relation between work and performance.) In the entry on "Extemporization or Improvisation" in an older edition of *New Grove* (Blum 1954), improvisation is described as "the primitive act of music-making"; the most recent edition (2001) completely reverses this view. Scruton refers more neutrally to "the emergence of 'works' from a tradition of spontaneous performance" – what Samson calls the "ancient art of improvisation" (Scruton 1997: 111; Samson 2008: 46). But the immense diversity of musical traditions puts such claims in question, as shown by Laudan Nooshin's critique of the traditional opposition of improvisation and composition.

Nooshin would not, I think, deny something like the familiar modernist story of Western music just presented. But she rightly disputes the terms in which it is usually expressed. Improvisation, she argues, is "a term which […] emerged in the context of European art music [as a] consequence of the development of notation (and thus the conceptual division between performer and composer)." By the late 19th century, it had "become a marker to distinguish between the creative processes in [Western art] music (which had notation and was therefore art) and other

musics (which generally did not and therefore were not)" (Nooshin 2003: 248). Thus, for one latter-day imperialist

> Indian music is almost entirely a matter of improvisation. Art […] never can be [improvised]. […] Indian music has yet to suffer the pangs of [artistic] birth [and] must boldly proclaim itself on paper, in black and white.
>
> *(Nichols 1944: 134 ff.)*

Treitler comments that music outside the Western notated tradition was often regarded as improvised, in the negative sense of being unprepared and unforeseen, "the exception to something […] more grounded" – the broader sense of "improvisation" discussed below (Treitler 1991). Nooshin summarizes this negative view of improvisation as "absence of notation equals non-cerebral, which […] equals non-art" (Nooshin 2003: 246).

In recent decades, that negative view has been transformed into something more positive but still subtly Eurocentric, Nooshin argues:

> improvisation had served partly as an arena to play out Western representations of the primitive and untutored "other"; now this orientalist trope was turned on its head and improvisation came instead to represent […][what] was perhaps being lost in modern Western societies.
>
> *(Nooshin 2003: 250)*[3]

However, she continues, "Despite a growing appreciation of improvisation as a kind of composition, the dualistic discourses have remained with us," as we fail to recognize the lengthy training of many improvised traditions (Nettl 1974; Nooshin 2003: 254, 251). Bruno Nettl challenged the idea of improvisation and composition as opposites, but still – Nooshin argues – it is important to insist that improvisational and compositional elements are found in all music (Nooshin 2003: 256).

Nooshin's critique seems to me largely correct. She is right – what writers failed to grasp is that improvisation is a kind of composition. But the explanatory power of her account would be enhanced by recognition of an important distinction: between *narrow* and *broader senses of composition* and *improvisation*, a distinction implicit in the language-game involving music and the performing arts.[4] Composition has two senses, to reiterate:

a narrow sense: works, usually desk-produced and notated.
b broad sense: putting things together in an aesthetically rewarding form.

"Putting things together in an aesthetically rewarding form" has to be intentional; the form cannot be an unintended consequence if the result is to count as composition. An artwork can have aesthetically repugnant elements, as perhaps in Francis Bacon's *Three Studies for Figures at the Base of a Crucifixion* from 1944, but the aim is always an aesthetically rewarding form. Thus, when free improviser Keith Rowe comments that "[t]here is no such thing as non-composed music. You can never get away from some form of composition" (Olewnick 2017: 134), he is referring to composition in the broad sense. There is no music – indeed, no art – that is not composed, in this sense.

Improvisation is a (broad-sense) compositional method, therefore. As Nettl comments, perhaps we should speak of "rapid and slow composition," rather than juxtaposing composition and improvisation (1974: 6). The phrase "improvisation as a compositional method" is used by some improvisers and funding bodies, in contrast with *paper composition* involving scores. As Tony Buck of The Necks comments,

> [I]t's no longer a dichotomy of improvising and composing […] improvisation is a methodology for composing, just like serialism, or rhythmic inter-locking.
>
> *(Hamilton, in preparation)*

What does "improvisation as a compositional method" involve? I propose two criteria:

1 Spontaneous composition
2 No repeat performance of the composition – rejection of the work-concept, of a *fixed and repeatable* composition.

These features are separable, because feature (1) can lead to the creation of works – which obviously means that feature (2) does not obtain. *New Grove* is wrong to say that improvisation is "the creation of a musical work, or the final form of a musical work, *as it is being performed*." This is because a *work* must be *repeatable, portable, and interpretable by others*. Improvisations are generally not works, though some have become works. Examples include those by maverick modernist Giacinto Scelsi, which were transcribed by Tosatti and others, and published as Scelsi's compositions. Scelsi intended his improvisations to be transcribed and published in this way, and in some jazz examples, in contrast, improvisations have been performed as if they were compositions, without the original improviser intending this. Thus, Jean-Yves Thibaudet performs Bill Evans improvisations, and George Russell based a composition on Miles Davis's solo on "So What." It may also be true that recording converts improvisations into works. But while an improvisation can *become* a work, generally, improvisation is a *compositional* method, but not a method of creating works.[5]

That concludes the examination of the concept of composition. I now move on to the concept of improvisation and its two senses.

2 The Different Senses of "Improvisation"

We have seen that improvisation is a method of artistic composition. Falling under the heading of broad sense composition are: narrow sense composition, in performing arts; improvisation in performing arts; and composition in non-performing arts, where narrow senses do not apply. Improvisation and narrow sense composition are inter-defined. We now consider the relation between broad and narrow senses of *improvisation*. Broad sense improvisation is *spontaneous creation* and includes improvisation that occurs in non-artistic contexts. Under this heading is spontaneous creation using an established method, that responds to expected or predictable circumstances, and spontaneous creation involving "making do" in the face of unexpected contingencies. The latter has artistic and non-artistic varieties or contexts – there is the artistic kind that stimulates or is required for creativity, and the practical kind that is forced rather than chosen and which is a nuisance at best and a catastrophe at worst. From this account, I think, we can draw out two main senses of "improvisation" – as spontaneous creation and as "making do." I relate these senses to Lydia Goehr's distinction between improvisation *extempore* and improvisation *impromptu*, which captures some aspects of improvisation but is not an exhaustive distinction.

Broad sense improvisation, as spontaneous creation, has the following narrower senses:

a In music and the performing arts, improvisation can use an established method – involving the production of material in spontaneous performance, without prior desk-work or non-notated composition. Thus, Mozart's improvised cadenzas adhered to the idiom of his notated works; while less spontaneous jazz improvisers employ a standard method that calls on a stock of idiomatic gestures or "licks."[6]

b Alternatively, improvisation is said to involve "making do" as opposed to "using an established method or conventional tools" – "We didn't have the proper tools/ingredients/instruments, so we had to improvise." For instance: "I didn't have a chisel, so I improvised using a screwdriver"; "I didn't have the right materials to fix the car, so I improvised with WD40 and Blu Tack."

Unlike sense (a), which is exclusively artistic, examples of sense (b) can be found in both artistic and non-artistic contexts, such as the following:

i General Lee was "on the defensive in 1865 […] desperately improvising one maneuver after another as Grant pressed him back and back" (Caro 2012: 458).
ii During the 2020 Coronavirus epidemic, *The Guardian* reported, "microbiologists improvise each day to fill unpredictable supply chain gaps that might leave them without swabs one day, and without crucial chemicals the next" (McCarthy 2020).
iii During World War II, Australian prisoners-of-war on Ambon improvised by making cooking buckets out of roofing sheets; drill bits from high tensile steel wire found in old truck tires; coconut presses from pieces of metal scrap; and a lathe from an old bicycle wheel (Rolley 2005).
iv My car's nearside wing mirror has for several months been held together by a wrapping of duct tape – an improvised repair that combines laziness with contempt for the motor-car as an aesthetic object (Figure 12.1).
v Tony Buck of The Necks was given an old drum-kit with which he "makes do," creatively (Hamilton, in preparation).

So the general picture is this. All improvisation is, in some sense, spontaneous creation – that is, the broad sense. Some spontaneous creation involves responding to expected or predictable circumstances through an established method; other spontaneous creation involves making do or using a non-established method in the face of unexpected contingencies. Approaches to musical improvisation vary in their spontaneity, therefore. As *New Grove* comments, improvisation "may

Figure 12.1 Andy Hamilton's Car.

involve the work's immediate composition by its performers, or the elaboration or adjustment of an existing framework, or anything in between" (2001). The most extensive or total spontaneous composition is found in genres such as free improvisation and perhaps free jazz. Mainstream jazz players draw more on pre-composed material, perhaps planning out the form of an improvisation in advance. "Making do" can arise from lack of technique, or lack of resources or equipment.

Discussion of improvisation in the mainstream philosophical literature has focused on the question of whether all rational or rationally guided activity involves improvisation in the sense of "making do." For Gilbert Ryle, all thinking involves improvisation. There is an unavoidable contextual element in reasoning that may be described as improvised, or as involving a response to contingencies:

> There must be in [the thinker's] response a union of some Ad Hockery with some know-how. If the normal human is not at once *improvising* and improvising *warily,* he is not engaging his somewhat trained wits in some momentarily live issue, but perhaps acting from sheer unthinking habit. So thinking […] is, at the least, the engaging of partly trained wits in a partly fresh situation. It is the pitting of an acquired competence or skill against an unprogrammed opportunity, obstacle, or hazard.
>
> *(Ryle 1976: 77)*[7]

Ryle's claim seems to be that all rational action involves applying a general ability to particular situations, using something ready to hand. To call that "making do" is wrong – those in wealthy consumer societies do not normally have to make do. "Making do" is doing something with *inadequate*, as opposed to *less than perfect* equipment. Real making do – or "bodging" – is where care, skill, or resources are minimal; the compositional element is limited. My bodged wing-mirror repair is an example, which I can only plead reflects alienation from the motor-car.

Design theorist David Pye takes a more negative view than Ryle, holding that everything we design is "an improvisation, a lash-up": "The essential bases of good design […] are largely useless and, unfortunately, avoidable […] few people realise how nastily things can be made and still work well enough." Pye aims to expose modernist functionalism as a fantasy:

> Nothing we design or make ever really works...Our dinner table ought to be variable in size and height, removable altogether, impervious to scratches, self-cleaning...The motor car ought to stop dead, and no one in it thrown forward, in the same instant that you press a button […].
>
> Things simply are not "fit for their purpose." At one time a flake of flint was fit for the purpose of surgery; and stainless steel is not fit for the purpose now. Everything we design and make is an improvisation, a lash-up, something inept and provisional. We live like castaways. But […] we can be debonair and make the best of it. If we cannot have our way in performance, we will have it in appearance.
>
> *(Pye 1978: 13 f.)*

There is an insight here – but the thought is not quite right. Whether something is fit for purpose depends on circumstances, such as availability of other means – and is often, therefore, temporary. But this does not mean that it is "a lash-up […] inept and provisional." That something is fit for purpose remains a judgment often readily settled, and is not a fantasy.

In a more recent discussion, Lydia Goehr contrasts "improvisation *extempore*" and "improvisation *impromptu*":

> When musicians make up music in performance, *from this moment forward*, their act falls under the familiar umbrella concept of...improvisation *extempore.* The second, less familiar concept,

> I'm calling improvisation *impromptu*. The latter refers to what we do at singular moments – *in the moment* – when we're put *on the spot*, particularly when we're confronted with an unexpected difficulty or obstacle.

Goehr comments that in the extra-musical literature, "the *extempore* and *impromptu* acts...tend to be run together without very explicit distinction," but she wishes to distinguish them:

> Improvisation *impromptu* is equally distinct from a music *freely* or *entirely extemporized* and one *worked out in advance*. It refers to what we do in any sort of activity or performance of life when we're suddenly confronted with an obstacle which, to win, continue, or survive, we must overcome [...] the concept has nothing essential to do with [...] the art of music at all, and much more to do with how we live our lives precariously and contingently – on the edge.

Improvisation extempore, she argues, has been used to attack the work-concept of classical music. But this is a concept that she wishes to re-energize, along with "the power of a way of thinking about improvisation...as when we say of persons or their acts...that they are inspired, innovative, or creative" (Goehr 2016: 460, 459).

How has improvisation *extempore* been used to undermine the classical work-concept? Goehr writes that "jazz improvisation – especially free jazz – has been made to stand for the general resistance to a regulation assumed by a standardized or pre-made music." According to this discourse of resistance, she continues, the performance of a work serves only to reproduce what is already created: "whereas performances improvised *extempore* are taken to be productive, performances of works are taken to be only *re*-productive." She notes that while few would affirm this crude opposition, it nonetheless conditions the assumption that around 1800, the work-concept emerged – and came to be regarded as contrary to that of improvisation *extempore*: "[It] came to overtax musical practice, and not just classical music practice. To diminish its power or authority, improvisation *extempore*, especially as tied to jazz, came to be accorded an emancipatory potential." However, improvisation *extempore* came to overstep its bounds also – and so Goehr wishes to impose limits on the concept and thus "re-release the power of the work-concept, to show that it does not exclude improvisation, [which means] much more than improvisation *extempore*" (Goehr 2016: 460).

Her analysis of the vicissitudes of the work-concept, I think, is absolutely right. There are parallels here with a theme of my precursor articles – that interpretation of musical works can accommodate an aesthetics of imperfection, since the latter is an aesthetics of *performance in general*, not just of improvised performance. Improvisation, as making do, underlies the concept of an aesthetics of imperfection as a positive response to contingencies, and commentators are wrong to say that the work-concept expresses an aesthetics of perfection. As Goehr argues, the concept of improvisation *impromptu* can re-energize classical music's work-concept, which improvisation *extempore* has been used to undermine.

We return to the issue of interpreting a work – the question of whether it is reproduction or new composition – in the final section. First, I wish to consider how Goehr's distinction relates to the senses of improvisation proposed earlier, involving spontaneous creation, and "making do." It may seem that my "spontaneous creation involving an established method" is her "improvisation *extempore*," while my "spontaneous creation involving making do" is her "improvisation *impromptu*." However, "improvisation *impromptu*" resembles less a concept or *sense* of improvisation, and more an expression of an ethics or aesthetics of imperfection, which valorizes a spontaneous response to contingencies in artistic performance and in everyday life. To reiterate Goehr's characterization, improvisation *impromptu*

> refers to what we do in any sort of activity or performance of life when we're suddenly confronted with an obstacle which, to win, continue, or survive, we must overcome […] [with] how we live our lives precariously and contingently – on the edge.

Improvisation *impromptu* has "nothing essential to do with […] the art of music," as Goehr comments. However, I would argue, it is an artistic or aesthetic concept and should be distinguished from improvisation as making do when that is a matter of necessity. Goehr does not make explicit the distinction between making do, in the context of a goal-directed activity – such as carrying out a repair or winning a battle – and improvisation as spontaneous artistic creation. Art is not goal-directed in the way that wars are. This contrast is related to that between *work* and *play* – work has a pre-structured goal built into the task, whereas in play, the goal is set by the activity. (The assumption that "play" is essentially frivolous would have to be countered.)

The contrasting kinds of improvisatory skill were brought together – perhaps serendipitously, perhaps not – by Art Tatum. Like all bar-playing pianists, Tatum confronted the problem of inferior instruments. Before a gig, he would run up and down the keyboard to check for out-of-tune or non-sounding keys, which he would then avoid.[8] Making do with an inferior piano draws on the same skills as spontaneous creation. Being able to play a song in all keys is essential to internalizing and improvising freely on it, but also to playing a piano with malfunctioning keys. (If D above middle C did not work, Tatum would avoid D major, for instance.) Listening to Tatum, listeners might well fail to realize that the piano had missing notes, and that there is any "making do" going on.

"Making do," when forced, often has inferior results; but it can also involve displays of great skill. When chosen, it approaches art, though not always successfully. Consider the example of General Lee in the American Civil War. He may, in some sense, have relished the challenge of fighting with inferior forces, and in a strictly military sense, we applaud his skill in doing so – this is in part an aesthetic evaluation. However, if he became so intrigued by the idea of making do that he demobilized half of his already impoverished forces in order to delight all the more in improvising with the remainder, he would rightly be accused of taking a purely aesthetic attitude to war – of not taking the war seriously. He would be described as making an artwork out of it. To reiterate, art is not goal-directed in the way that wars are – understanding what their goals are would involve an appeal to Clausewitz. When making do becomes an objective or a self-imposed limitation – when the action is set up in such a way that one is forced to make do – then the result becomes, or is close to, art.

The finest art revels in constraints; making do is essential to artistic practice. A TV series involving improvisatory cooks may approach the artistic realm.[9] An accomplished "improvising" cook can produce excellent meals from a random set of ingredients. In contrast, a "compositional" cook produces excellent meals every time, because they always make sure that they have the necessary ingredients – without which they would be at a loss. Likewise, someone who takes long road trips where they cannot carry their usual range of tools, may enjoy the challenge of "improvising" car repairs. Artistic constraints include the three-minute limit of the 78 rpm record, resented by some jazz artists but appreciated by others; or improvising on simple materials, which is more likely to give rise to spontaneous creation. The aesthetics of imperfection is one aspect of this reveling – where the artist enjoys responding spontaneously to contingencies – and shows that one person's "making do" is another person's inspiration. The imperfectionist sees the value in things that are ready to hand, as in Levi-Strauss' concept of *bricolage*. Artists often "make do" with tawdry material – from Billie Holiday's enforced recourse to pop trivia to *Arte Povera*'s use of bric-a-brac. Louis Armstrong made witty commentaries on inferior songs – a kind of "signifyin'," making something hip from something corny – while Holiday mined low-grade Tin Pan Alley songs, finding an unexpected beauty. Taking advantage of the disadvantages, one can enjoy the challenge of working with limited equipment. (The idea that self-limiting is the essence of art has changed its meaning since artists and critics began creating the rules – under classicism, the situation was different.)

It is debated how useful an ability "making do" is, in the course of everyday life or in goal-directed activities such as waging war. In this debate, "improvising" in the sense of "making do" is often pejorative, but not always – it can often be read either way. It is pejorative in Kiszely's contrast between the "imaginative and comprehensive" German air plan for the invasion of Denmark and Norway in 1940, and the "entirely reactive and improvised" British plan (Kiszely 2017: 222). But Kiszely also discusses British pride in improvisation – allegedly a national military characteristic, as in General Ironside's comment that the German Army "shrinks from improvisation":

> The underlying suggestion was that […] the gifted amateur […] would beat the dull professional […]. A reverence for flexibility, adaptability and empiricism became undue faith in "playing it off the cuff," which was actually no more than "muddling through"; the ability to improvise became not a useful part of, but a substitute for, military doctrine and sound planning.
>
> *(Kiszely 2017: 282 f.)*

Whether "making do" is pejorative depends on the context.

This section has shown that improvisation is an approach in the performing arts that is also found outside them, in contexts aesthetic and non-aesthetic. So the picture is more complex than Goehr suggests in her contrast of improvisation *extempore* and improvisation *impromptu*. However, I am not convinced that the contrast between artistic and non-artistic making do sketched here is quite correct – it must be pursued on another occasion. It may be that my definition of the aesthetics of imperfection as involving a "spontaneous response to the contingencies of the performing situation" is required in order to characterize improvisation itself.

3 Works, Performances and "Performance"

This concluding section develops the discussion of Goehr's critique of interpretation as reproductive, and broadens it to related issues, including the concept of artistic performance itself, somewhat neglected in the philosophical literature. I begin by examining the connection between work and performance from the standpoint of the aesthetics of imperfection. In the 19th and 20th centuries, a picture solidified according to which musical performances are either performances of a composition, or improvisations. Contemporary musicology is modifying that picture, with improvisation seen as a compositional method. That still leaves open the issue of the artistic contribution of the performer, in the case of performance of compositions. What does the perfectionist/imperfectionist debate have to say concerning that question? For Schoenberg the perfectionist, the interpreter is the work's servant: "He must read every wish from its lips." If he expresses his individuality, he becomes "a parasite on the exterior, when he could be the artery in the circulation of the blood." For Schoenberg, "the performer, for all his intolerable arrogance, is totally unnecessary except as his interpretations make the music understandable to an audience unfortunate enough not to be able to read it in print" (Leibowitz 1949: x).[10] This amounts to the "reproductive" view that Goehr rightly attacks. According to Busoni's more individualist position, in contrast, the performer has the freedom to make a genuinely artistic contribution. With the growing 19th-century divide between composer and performer, the Schoenbergian view became more influential. As Rachel Stroud notes, "[p]erformance of notated works is still often seen as diametrically opposed to the spontaneous, collaborative creativity of improvisation […] classical performers [are] somehow uncreative, destined to replicate stagnant 'works'" (Stroud 2020).

The view that a performance "reproduces" a score is nonsensical, however. Equally untenable is the recent musicological development of Busoni's position. *Performance as composition* treats interpreting a score, as well as what is generally referred to as improvisation, as composition

(Blum 2001: 192 f.). This may be Alperson's view when he argues that "the activity of performance seems necessarily to involve composition. [It] always involves formative decisions about how a piece shall sound, i.e., decisions about the form or composition of the piece" (Alperson 1984: 19). Possibly, however, Alperson is making the salutary claim that the performer is an interpreter who aims to elucidate and realize the form of the piece. The "performance as composition" view is untenable; improvisation may be a compositional method, but performance, as such, is not. A classical performer does not *create* a work or create material when they perform it. Performance of a composition that is a work, viz. something already created, such as Richter's performance of Debussy, does not involve creation of new material. The only performances that create new material are spontaneous improvisations – or perhaps the performance of some compositions by Boulez and Stockhausen, that involve elements of performer choice that decide the form on a particular occasion. (One could perhaps argue that improvisation is a method of both composition and performance – or alternatively, that it undermines the distinction between composition and performance created by the composer-performer divide.)

What is required is a middle way between the crude "mechanical reproduction" view of performances of compositions – which, as Goehr rightly comments, is still often assumed if not affirmed – and the contemporary "performance as composition" view. The middle way, recognized by practice and criticism, is that *performance and interpretation* are *artistic, not reproductive processes*. As Stephen Davies rightly remarks, "we regard performance as an 'art' in its own right." One can acknowledge that interpretation is an artistic process while denying that it is a form of composition. This is not to say that performance is universally artistic. Davies' view that "[n]ecessarily, the work is interpreted in being performed" (Davies 2001: 152), and Sharpe's (1979) position that performances are tokens of an interpretation, are not entirely convincing. A banal performance might fail to express an interpretation while still being a performance. In contrast, a casual read-through or sight-reading – "casual," because rare performers can give exceptional sight-readings – would fail even to be a performance.

Composition is the creation of a musical form. The score's dynamics and expression markings serve to articulate the form that the composer has created for the guidance of the performer. When the performer creates their own interpretation, with its own expressive articulation, they attempt to realize a form that has already been created. The traditional, and artistically most profound, concept of interpretation involves fidelity to the composer's intention – truth to the work (*Werktreue)*, as illustrated in Dinu Lipatti's transcendently beautiful recording of Chopin's "Barcarolle," Op. 61. There are parallels with acting, where the actor becomes the character that they are playing. Performers who fail to investigate the composer's intention may completely misrepresent it. But interpretation is also self-expression, because the greatest works have multiple meanings, including ones that – for good and ill – the composer had not envisaged. As Adorno suggested, interpretation of the greatest works is inexhaustible (see Paddison 2016). An interpretation should be individual and characterful, therefore, while serving the work's creator. In music written for virtuosic display, such as Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsodies,* the performer has more freedom than in a Bach Fugue, where compositional content is denser. But all creative interpreters strive for improvisational freshness – the illusion that a work is being created spontaneously.

But what exactly *is* performance? Philosophers have focused on the interpretation of classical works, and the relation between work and performance, as questions in ontology of art – in particular Nelson Goodman's notorious view that to count as a performance, what is played must match the score exactly.[11] They have neglected the more fundamental question – what is an artistic performance? The concept of *performance* forms a holism with improvisation, composition, audience, and related concepts – that is, these concepts are interdependent, and acquired simultaneously.[12] It may be that "performance" is an everyday as opposed to a technical concept – like "harm," perhaps, as it appears in J.S. Mill's "harm condition." That may amount to saying that performances

are found in every human society – in contrast to the more historically conditioned concept of "artwork." Performances, in the arts or entertainment

1 address an audience or are intended to do so, even if no one in fact attends,
2 are more than a casual read-through or sight-read, which do not *address* an audience,
3 do not include pauses for corrections; stopping to correct a mistake is either an *interruption* to a performance or *part* of a performance and, therefore, not a genuine correction.

These are features of *formal performance,* that is, performances that now belong within the systems of art and entertainment described in Section 1. (Sport should also be included, but that introduces its own complications.) There is a broader sense of "performance" discussed in social psychology and sociology, and the contrast is brought out by considering a painter who invites people to come and see them painting. This may well not count as a performance in a formal sense, but sociologists and social psychologists might argue that the painter is engaged in a performance of the self as a painter. On this view of "self as performance," interaction with others always involves a performative presentation – to conform with social norms or to gain power. Influential treatments in the literature include Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and Judith Butler's account of gender as performative (Goffman 1990; Butler 2006).

The performative view in sociology says that people are actors on a social stage, who actively project a self-image or social identity for the benefit of an audience and, ultimately, themselves. There is a continuum of such performances, from the sincere to the contrived. The view allows that presenting the self can be – or at least feel – spontaneous, and is not the same as "playing a role." The interesting claim, apparently based on observation, is that more behavior than we thought falls into the "performance" category. The dramaturgical metaphor is pervasive in the literature; people act on a social stage, but have more relaxed roles backstage, and so on. But one cannot understand the notion of social performance if one does not understand theatrical performance. So my central argument is not that it is nonsensical to claim that all social behavior involves self-presentation – though it may be. Rather, it is that there has to be a core notion of artistic or entertainment performance – what I call "formal performance" – for the performative theory of social interaction to be possible, let alone plausible. It is worth noting that between Goffman's self-presentation and formal public performances are informal performances, as when someone does an impersonation of a friend or colleague. But to reiterate, my concern is with *formal performances* within the systems of art, entertainment, and sport.

I believe that features (1)–(3) listed above capture the concept of a formal performance in the artistic or entertainment sense. Some elucidation of these is required. Feature (3) says that when art is a performance, it is incorrigible – that is, there is no possibility of correction without interrupting the performance. It is a formal feature of an artistic or entertainment performance that it does not pause for corrections; stopping to correct a mistake is an interruption to a performance – "the show must go on." This may reflect the ritual basis of performance – the performer must keep going and try to conceal any mistakes. Incorrigibility, therefore, has two senses – people are incorrigible, i.e., infallible, and processes or performances are incorrigible. Painting in watercolor is incorrigible, but it is not a performance. A recording involves a performance if, and only if, it is live or essentially one-take (minor corrections are possible).

Regarding feature (1), David Davies' *Philosophy of the Performing Arts*, while focusing on aforementioned issues in ontology, rightly contrasts intentional and non-intentional senses of "performance" – whether of cars or students. Davies cites non-artistic performances, such as the exuberant umbrella technique of a city-worker (2011: 5). The performer "intends for her actions to be appreciated and evaluated, and thus is consciously guided in what she does by the expected ear or ear of an intended qualified audience" (6); the performing artist's actions are conditioned

partly by their expectations concerning the reactions of that audience. Davies later considers whether there has to be an attentive audience or any audience at all – I would say that while there may be no audience present, the norm is that there is. How attentive it is presumed to be has varied historically. James Johnson has shown that attentive audiences in music are a modern development, first appearing in early 19th-century Paris. Johnson concludes that between 1750 and 1850, French audiences at first had a superficial, distracted mode of listening, but gradually "stopped talking and started listening" (1994: 1).[13]

Taking "art" in its now-dominant aesthetic sense, "performance" must be extended beyond "the performing arts" to the world of entertainment. Davies does not discuss the category of pure entertainment, which is not part of the artworld, but belongs to the associated world of entertainment and sport – and clearly involves addressing an audience.[14] His umbrella-wielding city worker may just want to entertain passers-by – or may dream of being noticed by a dance impresario and becoming an artist. Performers, in Davies' "full sense," can be artists, entertainers, or ordinary people "showing off."

The artist-entertainer distinction has some fluidity. Insofar as artistic performers must *address* an audience, they are, if only in a limited sense, entertainers – even when performing works of the most *recherché* modernism. Many artistic performers have been unhappy with the imperative to entertain; inhibited artists do not relish the theatrical aspects of performance. Chopin was a famously reluctant performer. To address his anxieties at his last Paris concert in February 1848, the promoter Pleyel decorated the venue to resemble a drawing-room, and seated the pianist's friends onstage, around the piano (Walker 2019: 544–8). Jazz musicians Tom Harrell and Lee Konitz often appear reluctant performers, their thoughtful intensity mischaracterized as "cerebral" (Hamilton 2007b, 2014). Glenn Gould retired to the safety of the recording studio – perhaps due more to intolerance of the imperfection of live performance than to shyness. In contrast, there are performers who love the audience, to the extent that their artistry is undermined by crowd-pleasing.

In a musical performance, often, there is a work – something already composed and intended for repeated performance. There are genres of visual art that correspond to that model, such as sand-painting; the design is created, then realized in live performance. In China, there are performing calligraphists. But not all genres or processes of visual art that are incorrigible in this sense are performances. They do not have an audience. To reiterate, a painter might invite people to come and see them painting, without this being a performance in a formal sense. (It may not, for instance, include feature (1) above, addressing an audience.)

Artistic performance seems to have an inevitable entertainment element, therefore. As I argue elsewhere, the category of artist-entertainer – such as Charles Dickens or Louis Armstrong – is a vital one for understanding the relation of art and entertainment. However, there is an essential contrast between the aims of art and entertainment. Art is about engaging with an audience in a way that may transform them; entertainment aims only to amuse or divert. The aesthetics of perfection is a mode of entertainment – or of classicism. But pursuing these issues must be material for another occasion. What I have been concerned to stress here is that an aesthetics of imperfection is an aesthetic of performance, and not of improvisation alone; that improvisation is a compositional method, in a narrow sense of composition; and that while the concept of improvisation extends beyond artistic practice, it has a key role within art, in the sense of "making do" or self-limitation.[15]

Notes

1 See for instance Treitler (1982).
2 Young (2015) defends an opposed view of the system of the arts. Kubik's arguments (2017) suggest that the modernist story of non-Western music as communal expression is due for agonizing re-appraisal.
3 The orientalist trope is targeted in Brothers' magisterial (2014).

4 This is a development of G. E. R. Lloyd's distinction between broad and narrow cultural concepts (2009).
5 For a defense of improvisations as works, see Gibbs (2020).
6 The contrast between genuinely spontaneous improvisers such as Konitz and Lester Young, and "hacks" who use licks – and the cases in between – is a leitmotif of Hamilton (2007b).
7 Ryle discusses improvisational action in general, but strangely, makes no reference to improvisation in music. Commentators (Alperson 1984; Lewis and Piekut 2016) explain this as philistine affectation, a regrettable feature of Oxford philosophy of that time. See also Jencks and Silver (2013).
8 Pianist Billy Taylor reports that he took "a quick tactile survey of which notes were there and which notes were missing […] he could instantly recalibrate his improvisations around the missing notes" (Taylor 2013: 57).
9 There was a BBC daytime TV cooking game show called *Ready Steady Cook*, which ran from 1994 to 2010; it was not close to art, however.
10 Reported by his pupil Dika Newlin; quoted in Taruskin (2009: 170).
11 Davies (2001: Ch. 4) provides an excellent summary, including a bibliography on p. 153, footnote 1. As Levinson sensibly comments, "The line between *somewhat incorrect performances* and *nonperformances* is not a sharp one" (Levinson 1987: 76).
12 On the notion of conceptual holism, see, for instance, Hamilton (2020b).
13 See also Thorau and Ziemer (2018).
14 The neglected aesthetics of entertainment is the topic of Hamilton (forthcoming 2022), which also discusses the original sense of "art" as practical in contrast to theoretical knowledge.
15 Earlier versions of the material in Section 1 appeared in previous articles on imperfection. Thanks for comments from Stephanie Cant, Andrew Cooper, Katherine Hambridge, Lara Pearson, Roger Squires, Lloyd Swanton, and Rachael Wiseman.

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13

IMPROVISATION AS AESTHETIC APPEARANCE

Christoph Haffter

In what follows, I want to consider a question that might sound strange to many who write about artistic improvisation: Can improvisation be an aesthetic category? For sure, artists often improvise and there is no doubt that improvisation represents an integral aspect of some artistic practices. But the presence of improvisation in the artistic field does not by itself turn the concept of improvisations into an *aesthetic* category – a concept that grasps something that is specifically pertinent for aesthetic experiences, judgments, events or entities.

By arguing this, I am endorsing the distinction between aesthetic, theoretical and practical rationality: the Kant-inspired differentiation of reason. In other words, I presuppose that the way we relate to and experience artworks differs substantially from and cannot be reduced to our relation to objects of knowledge nor to our recognition of moral agents and the appreciation of their actions.[1] Aesthetically understood, improvisation would be neither a matter of fact nor a question of values. Hence the question: Is there such an *aesthetic* sense of the notion of improvisation?

The historical background of my questioning is the fading of the emancipatory promise that improvisational practices were supposed to express in the avant-garde of the 1960s. These promises have revealed themselves to be illusionary – few are the artists today who claim that improvisation was in itself an act of liberation. I want, in a *first step*, to argue that this disillusion is a *progress* in artistic self-understanding as the emancipatory promise was, at least partly, based on a non-aesthetic conception of improvisation. In a *second step*, and against this self-not-transparent account of artistic improvisation, I would like to consider what an aesthetic dimension of improvisation might be: These considerations will be mainly concerned with musical improvisation, but they can easily be generalized into other fields. I will argue that such an aesthetic dimension can be found in the *improvisational character* or *quality* of an artwork. The question of the improvisational character of the sensible appearance is to be distinguished from the question whether a performance is actually improvised. Hence, from an aesthetic point of view, improvisation is essentially a matter of appearances.[2] This idea goes against a commonly accepted thesis in the discourse on musical improvisation that improvised performances could only (or at least better) be appreciated *as actions* and not *as products*. I'll try to articulate some objections against this view, in order to argue, in the *third section* of this text, in favor of a materialist conception of artistic improvisation. The notion of artistic material allows to integrate the historicity of our aesthetic capacities within a theory of the artwork.

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1 The Non-Aesthetic Appraisal of Improvisation

1.1 The Promise of Emancipation

The question whether improvisation is an aesthetic category isn't merely a generic and scholastic issue for art philosophers. My interest in this question rather stems from the experience of the concrete and contingent present situation of art, especially of contemporary music. In the large field of contemporary art music, improvisation has become a commonly accepted practice for musicians, performers and composers. It is one potential strategy to create a musical artwork, next to the separation of score writing and instrumental reproduction, on the one side, and the elaboration of fixed electronic music on the other. Which of these strategies of production an artist or a group of artists chooses, depends on the demands and problems of the artistic project in question. A principal exclusion of one or two of these approaches has become rather exceptional among artists.

This has definitely not always been the case. In the decades after 1945, the idea of artistic improvisation was clearly by itself presenting something of a promise. The artistic decision *not* to follow any score, script or screenplay, but to let the performers display their capacities spontaneously was considered to be a substantial artistic claim per se. The substance of the claim was the negation of the dominant way to produce art, which was tantamount to authoritarian planning: Authors, composers and directors doing the brain work and commanding actors, performers and musicians being merely executing bodies. By negating this hegemonial artistic practice, improvisation was thought to express a form of resistance against a whole range of non-artistic phenomena of domination and exploitation. Be it in music, cinema or theater, artistic improvisation as artistic *freedom* was, or at least was intended to be, in solidarity with political emancipation.

If my observation is correct, this claim for emancipatory implication of artistic improvisation has vanished (at least in the discourse of musical avant-garde) while the practice itself has become more and more common.[3] Even if such general statements always run the risk of simplification, they are useful in order to identify historical tendencies. My interpretation of such a trend, for which I intend to argue in this essay, is the following: The emancipatory promise was based on a non-aesthetic conception of improvisation, a conception that is aesthetically irrelevant. However, artworks are first and foremost correlates of aesthetic judgments, they are produced in order to be somehow *aesthetically* experienced, judged or appreciated. Hence, to center the emancipatory power of an artistic practice around a concept that does not directly concern the aesthetic import of improvisation cannot be convincing in the long run. To put it other words: Improvisation continues to be practiced in art even if its promise of emancipation has vanished – so there must be something specific in improvisation that is *aesthetically* relevant.[4] If this is true, the vanishing of the discourse around the liberating power of improvisation doesn't have to be interpreted negatively as a conservative reaction, but can be read positively as a progression in artistic self-understanding. It is the disappearance of a confusion. But this clarification cannot succeed as long as there is no satisfying response to the question above: What would be an understanding of artistic improvisation that *is* aesthetically relevant? An answer to this question would not only allow us to better understand the artistic present, but it could also lead to another reading of the historical artworks from the 1960s – liberating them from the pathos of liberation that has lost its force of persuasion.[5]

1.2 First Nature, Second Nature and the Semblance of Freedom

Musica Elettronica Viva, a collective of improvising composer-performers centered around Alvin Curran, Frederic Rzewski and Richard Teitelbaum, can be taken as a key example of the emancipatory promise of improvisation. It was founded in the 1960s when similar collectives were created, including Franco Evangelisti's *Nuova Consonanza*, the *AMM* and the *Spontaneous Music*

Ensemble in London, Cornelius Cardew's *Scratch Orchestra* and the *Art Ensemble of Chicago* emerging from the *Association for the Advancement of Creative Musicians* (AACM). Most of them related the practice of non-idiomatic improvisation to some sort of political critique, centered around the struggle for civil rights in the USA and around the critique of capitalism and bourgeois culture in Europe (Beal 2014). *Musica Elettronica Viva* included unusual instruments, especially experimental live electronic devices. The pianist Rzewski, for example, refused to play on his bourgeois instrument, replacing it by a piano-shaped glass on which he placed contact-microphones; Richard Treitelbaum experimented with electrodes capturing the brain activity of a performer in order to use it as the input signal of a synthesizer. They also invited the audience to participate in collective sessions – called *Soup* or *Soundpool* – in order to anticipate the utopian state of domination-free interaction. Their improvisations were staged during student protests, at factory strikes and in prisons. Alvin Curran (2008) writes retrospectively:

> MEV constitutional law was about human trust. This law, unspoken in MEV circles, is the fundamental premise of any spontaneous collective musical essay. In this context, it implies that in an ideal state, all performing musicians will listen with equal intensity and understanding to every audible sound and musical gesture as if it were their own and respond only when they must. An important corollary allows this agreement of trust to be momentarily voided, in cases of inspired autism.

The members of *Musica Elettronica Viva* were academically trained composers, but they referred to Free Jazz and the performances of *The Living Theater* when commenting on their practice. They could have equally referred to filmmakers such as Shirley Clarke who realized *The Connection* on the basis of a performance by *The Living Theater*, or to Jean-Luc Godard, who notoriously pushed his actors into improvisation on the set. The background against which these practices of the 1960s emerged was a professionalized cultural industry with its conventions of production and craftmanship, hierarchical decision processes and a general atmosphere of bourgeois stiffness (Toop 2016; Froger 2017). Improvisation, on the other side, was associated with social inclusion and unprofessionalism, it refused the idea that art was a refined craft that was supposed to break apart the conventional frames that constricted artistic expression and repressed the creativity of the individual (Belgrad 1998). The vitalism of Antonin Artaud was also an important source for these poetics. The dominance of the score, script and screenplay over the live performance was diagnosed as another symptom of the sickness of capitalist modernity and as another sign of the life-negating tendency of bourgeois culture, which artists can only fight with the aid of the drastic treatment of cruelty, conceived of as the form-transgressing expression of uncontrolled vitality (Artaud 2001).

This conception of artistic improvisation is, thus, closely related to what one could take as the core of *performance art*: Artistic labor is not conceived as the display of individual mastery, but as the initiation of a collective investigation into the unpredictable dynamics of bodily interaction (Krämer 2014: 229). This idea of improvisation is clearly different, and almost opposed to a traditionalist conception of improvisation one encounters, for example, in liturgical contexts, in the historical performance practice of music from the Baroque and Renaissance, but also in contemporary idiom-based practices of so-called popular and folklore culture. In a traditionalist's view, the improvising artist must have perfectly appropriated the conventions of a certain style in order to express herself naturally in the most virtuosic way. Such technical virtuosity affirms the traditional language of art, embodying the conventional idiom as a sort of second nature, and thereby asserting the possibility of living expression within the existing culture. The avant-garde improvisations of the 1960s, on the contrary, aimed precisely at the destruction of a presumably repressive second nature in the name of the first: the unground of formless vitality.

However, such an emphasis on the open-endedness of artistic experimentation and the unpredictability of collective acts of expression can mask the persistence – or possibly the need for – a moment of control and method in any artistic working process, even in those artistic approaches the aim of which was to break with any such moments of control and method. The contingency of artistic performances is planned, the unpredictable outcome is organized, chance is induced through procedures and scenarios.[6] Cinematic approaches to improvisation had to reflect this latent contradiction more openly than musical ones: the presence of the film director within the film scene, telling the actors to behave in a way that does not seem directed, is a common motive in works by Clarke and Godard. The fact that, in film, even the most unpredictable behavior becomes an object of manipulation as soon as it is recorded, ascribes unsurmountable limits to the idea of improvisation in cinema: In the editing process, the filmmakers work on improvised footage in a non-improvisatory way. In the art of montage, individual improvisation always only represents one step in a highly mediated and intersubjective process of production. In this sense, Marion Froger even argued that the whole discourse of improvisation surrounding the cinema of the Nouvelle Vague is part of a self-mystification by means of which the young directors managed to detach themselves from the demands of the established film industry (Froger 2017).

Whatever one may think about her analysis,[7] the doubt that drives Froger's argument can be generalized: Artworks *can appear* to be improvised even if they *are produced* in a completely non-improvisatory way. My stance here is the following: With regard to the aesthetic judgment, what counts *are,* first of all, the appearances (*Erscheinungen*). Freedom, spontaneity or whatever kind of absence of coercion and predetermination one associates with the practice of improvisation – insofar as they are features of an artwork – are first and foremost to be considered in their phenomenal manifestation. With regard to representational art forms, the question of whether appearances are deceptive is commonly known to be misplaced: To ask whether an actor who seems to improvise, and *really* doesn't follow a script, is aesthetically as far beside the point as to question whether the same actor actually feels the sentiments she's expressing in her performance. Contrary to non-artistic situations – where the question of whether the phenomenal appearance of freedom is grounded in actual instances of free actions is of the highest importance – the aesthetic appearance cannot be questioned in the same way. Even in the movement of *parabasis* – when the actor looks into the camera or addresses the audience in order to destroy the illusion of a diegetic closure – the veil of appearances is not torn apart, but only internally differentiated: the real face behind the mask is part of the fiction. This is the idea I would like to think through: To experience something aesthetically means to consider the appearances in question *as appearances*, independently from the fact that they are mere *semblances* or not.[8]

In music, however, the consciousness that the sounding appearances are to be taken as such is rare, at least in the pre-theoretical discourse about improvisation. In this sense, there is a widespread difficulty in considering music aesthetically: Improvised actions are often considered real instances of self-determined or spontaneous actions and the collective improvisation stand in is seen as a model or even a realization of a free social practice. In this way, the phenomenal character of artistic improvisation is neglected and the supposed fact that these actions are improvised tends to be appreciated from the standpoint of practical rationality.

Furthermore, such a focus on practical issues can lead to a certain blindness with regard to the source of the belief that certain performances are improvised. The fact that artists are improvising is normally communicated to the audience in form of what I would call an *anecdote of production*. Such anecdotes provide background information about how an artwork has been produced: That fact that the sound of a synthesizer is controlled by brain waves (Musica Elettronica Viva) is such a case. Such information has a strong influence the art critical discourse, even though the relation between these anecdotes and the actual artistic appearances is rather loose. In the worst cases,

these background stories resemble those composers' love affairs musicologists used to recount in order to explain why a work is written in a minor key. The fact that an artwork is surrounded by these kinds of stories doesn't make it either more or less aesthetically convincing. However, such anecdotes of production can themselves become the material of an artwork – this is one important strategy of conceptual art that has, for example, been further developed in Walid Raad's *Atlas Group* (Osborne 2013). In this case, the anecdotes of production are in fact part of the artistic reflection that the conceptual work of art displays. Most of the time though, the anecdotes are not integrated as a conceptual layer into the very fabric of the artwork.

2 Contextual Knowledge and Improvisational Appearances

2.1 Perception and Beliefs

My line of reasoning has led into a clear-cut distinction between what is *believed* about the production of an artwork and what is *sensuously perceived* of it. This distinction, however, faces its own problems. In order to get a better grip on the question how far background assumptions might influence aesthetic appearances, I want to quickly recall the debate on the relation between belief and perception in aesthetic experience. This debate was ignited a couple of decades ago in relation to composed musical artworks. However, as we will see, these considerations can become fruitful in the context of evaluating an improvised performance.

The main question of that debate can be put as follows: Do context beliefs alter our aesthetic appreciation of an artwork? I just want to pick out two positions from this huge discussion: that of Jerrold Levinson, who classically defended a *contextualist* position, and Julian Dodd's *empirical sonicism*, which denies the contextualist claim. While the contextualist highlights the importance of art historical knowledge for the appreciation of artworks, the sonicist stresses the prima facie equally plausible intuition that the object of our aesthetic appreciation is what we hear: aesthetic judgments are not about what we believe (Dodd 2007). Levinson famously introduced the thought-experience of a pair of *Doppelgänger*, of identically sounding works that were composed at different moments in time: Richard Strauss composing Schönberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* twenty years earlier, a Carl Stamitz symphony composed by a post-modern artist. Aesthetic categories such as *eeriness* or *irony* would be rather attributed to the anachronistic double than to the original, and as such attributes certainly play a role in our judgment of appreciation, Levinson claims the context-sensitivity of aesthetic appreciation (Levinson 1980). Dodd, on the contrary, holds a clear distinction between *aesthetic* properties of a piece that are heard and *artistic* properties of the work, i.e., knowledge about the artist and the historical circumstances of production. Faced with Levinson's *doppelgänger*, he recommends being "bullish":

> [The empiricist] should insist that genuinely aesthetic properties (i.e., those heard in the work) cannot vary in the cases imagined by Levinson. Works of music (i.e., works of the same artistic category) cannot differ aesthetically without sounding different.
>
> *(Dodd 2007: 268)*

At the same time, Dodd admits that perception is not an invariable phenomenon. And not every perception is an adequate perception of the work, and there is a sense in which one has to develop the right sensitivity, one has to be attuned with the work in order to be able to appreciate it fully. In this sense, contextual knowledge is not completely exterior to the aesthetic experience:

> […] it is possible that gaining detailed knowledge of a work's provenance may help the listener to develop the capacity to hear a piece as it should be heard; but such a route to becoming a

> sensitive auditor is not essential: someone could come to understand a work of music merely by dint of listening to other such works and thereby developing appropriate critical faculties and a feel for the music.
>
> *(Dodd 2007: 275)*

But what does it mean to listen to "other such works" and to have an appropriate "feel for the music?" Some contextual knowledge is hidden in these seemingly innocent expressions. Because one cannot even distinguish different styles or types of music without possessing at least some basic art history orientation. The vague expression *to get a feel for a certain kind of music* means nothing else than the appropriation and sedimentation of contextual knowledge into the very fabric of perception. In this way, art historical context is turned into a perceptive capacity. To be sensitive to a musical style, to understand a musical language, to be familiar with a certain type of music presupposes the implicit capacity to distinguish between art historical contexts within which these works are articulated. Through the formation of the senses, this rudimentary art historical knowledge becomes an internal aspect of perception – a non-propositional, habitual knowledge that can be developed in perfect ignorance of the musicological vocabulary. If one wants to better understand the aesthetic appreciation of music, there is no sense in drawing a clear-cut distinction between the mere sound perception and context interpretation: accurate perception is unavoidably stylistically informed.

Without adding any conclusive argument to this debate, I would suggest that there is a theoretically attractive way to reconcile the opposing intuitions of contextualism and sonicism. Dodd has a strong point when he insists, in the appreciation of musical works, on the primacy of the sonic with regard to the aesthetic judgment: We aesthetically appreciate, first of all, the audible features of a piece and not its position in the art historical development. But he is going too far when he concludes that aesthetic appreciation is completely independent from contextual knowledge. Because it seems very difficult to deny that the perceptual capacities and aesthetic experiences of historically situated listeners are at least partially shaped by contextual supposition: if you strip off every contextual assumption, there is no aesthetic appreciation left at all.[9] The aesthetic qualities of sonic appearances do not exist completely detached from the history of the artistic means of expression. On the other side, and with regard to Levinson's historical oddities, especially the example of a postmodern classicist, I doubt whether some new contextual information of this kind would by itself change the way we perceive the sounding structure of the piece. In the real practices of artistic historicism, be it modernist neoclassicism or postmodern neoromanticism, we would look out for aesthetic features that betray the stylistic anachronism as soon as we get the context information that the work was composed at a time when the style was already historical. Without any such sounding divergences, the anachronistic work would supposedly just be perceived and appreciated as belonging to another context than the one it was created in – the context suggested by the appearance of the work prevails over the real one.[10] One way to resume this discussion would be as follows: While explicit propositional contextual knowledge is usually[11] irrelevant for the aesthetic appreciation, the implicit contextual knowledge that is sedimented in our sensitivity is the very matter aesthetic experience works on.

2.2 The Act-Product Distinction

With this in mind, we can come to the question of improvisation. My thoughts follow that of Nicolas Cook and Philip Auslander, who claimed that there is no way to distinguish improvised music through listening (Cook 2017: 66): in theory (and in practice), it is always possible to "cheat." There are, of course, indicators and negative criteria of improvisation – the absence of unison and coordinated sudden changes, the prevalence of variation and static or cyclic forms – but these are

not exclusive. Hence, the Levinsonian question: Are two identical sonic events differently perceived and appreciated if one of them is believed to be an improvisation?

The contextualist position affirms this statement. This position has been highly influential in the philosophical discourse on improvisation. I would like to extract such a contextualist argument from Philip Alperson's classic text on improvisation.[12] He famously claimed that there are two distinct ways of listening to music, two different modes of attention: one can listen to music either as an activity or as a sonic structure, as an action or as a product (Alperson 1984: 24). Improvised music demands the first mode: To appreciate an improvisation means to consider it as an action. A critic who judges an improvisation on the basis of structural listening, commits a "category mistake." In Alperson's the distinction between action and product provides an argument in order to defend improvisation against the charge of presumed musical poverty. He concedes that, as far as the sound structure itself is considered, "musical improvisation typically pales in comparison with the conventional situation where a composer produces a composition antecedently to its public performance" (Alperson 1984: 22). But this lack of the sonic structure does not diminish the aesthetic appreciation, according to Alperson, if this appreciation is directed, not at the resulting sound, but at the activity that produces this sound.

> In this regard, we attend to a musical improvisation much in the way that we attend to another's talk: we listen past the "mistakes" and attend to the actual development of a work. […] the aesthetic object of musical improvisation can be, and, by experienced listeners, typically is, understood in terms of a kind of action, the particular shaping activity of the improviser who creates for us a musical utterance unmediated by another human being. It is as if the improviser's audience gains privileged access to the composer's mind at the moment of musical creation.
>
> *(Alperson 1984: 24)*

Alperson could have borrowed this idea from Hegel's *Lectures on Fine Arts*. Hegel claims that improvisation is the highest form of instrumental music because here the productive activity of the genius manifests itself within the artwork. (Hegel 1975: 957 f.; see Bertinetto 2016b on Hegel's view of improvisation). The experience of improvised music, in this view, opens up immediate access to the creative activity of the composing subject, whereas the performance of a written composition is a mediated representation of a creative act in the past. What is appreciated aesthetically, according to Alperson and Hegel, is not primarily the completeness of a sonic construction, but the lively activity of articulation. Alperson's distinction, in my reading, does not concern the difference between the merely sonic and the extra-sonic dimension of improvisation: The act-product distinction applies to the sonic, it concerns two ways of *listening*. Whether non-sonic dimensions of the sound producing actions – the visible gestures and shapes of the musician's body, his attitude, dress, staging, etc. – might be an integral part of the artistic performance or not, is another question. To *listen* to an improvisation *as act* and not as structure means to appreciate the sonic phenomena in a different way: Instead of appreciating the integral network of intervallic, rhythmic or timbral relationships in a quasi-simultaneous act of recollection, one follows the music as an articulation of an utterance *in statu nascendi,* as a succession of momentary acts of decision, of trials, of explorations or hesitations.

However, when it comes to music, all the emphasis on the vital immediacy of the musician's activity in improvisation doesn't make the distinction between a process or activity of production and the sonic product less problematic. Because in the case of music and other performing arts (for painting or sculpture the situation might be different),[13] the product or the result of the activity *is* a process: A piece of music is not a fixed set of relations that can be appreciated aesthetically in separation from the process of sound production, but it is the structure of this very process. A musical

product is a developing, progressing, changing appearance: The activity of sound production and the produced musical structure have the same temporal being. If the members of the audience are able to witness and aesthetically appreciate the sound producing activity of the artist – what happens in the composer's "mind" to use Alperson's phrase – during an improvisation, this is mainly possible because the activity *appears* in the very sonic structure they hear. An activity that would not manifest itself within the sonic process at all could not be aesthetically appreciated through listening. If music is capable of giving access to the subjective activity of its creation, this must happen, if not exclusively, at least in a very relevant part, through the medium of sound. In other words: There is no need to refer to extra-sonic dimensions in order to appreciate a complex of sonic appearances *as a process, an activity or an act of production*.

This is why Alperson's defense of improvisation against the charge of musical poverty isn't convincing.[14] He argues that the change in perspective is supposed to alter the criteria of appreciation: While a composition is appreciated for its originality, coherence or complexity, the improvising musician is admired for her sensitivity, lyricism, risk-taking or skill. But if Alperson's presupposition was true and improvised music was generally less interesting than composed ones, I cannot see how such a change in perspective would change anything about appreciative judgment. What would it mean to admire someone's productive skill without considering the appearances she produces? How can one admire the risk-taking of an action when its result is a failure? How can I appreciate the sensitivity or lyricism of an act of sound production if the produced sound structure doesn't appear to be sensitive and lyrical?

The most natural way to defend Alperson's case would, therefore, be to drop the presupposition: It is not convincing to claim that the sound structures of improvisations are *per se* aesthetically less interesting than compositions. Such a general assertion not only ignores the logic of the aesthetic judgment, which always refers to singularities, but moreover it seems to be based on complexity as a rigid criterion of artistic excellency.

2.3 Improvisational Characters

It is more or less uncontroversial that "liveliness" and "unpredictability" are among the aesthetic properties that we mostly associate with improvisation. But liveness and unpredictability, on the other side, as long as they are taken as qualities of the sonic appearances, are not exclusive to improvised performances. The history of composition is full of artworks that were celebrated precisely for displaying such improvisational characters – genres such as the Italian *ricercar* or the *fantasia*, as it was coined by C. P. E. Bach with its far-reaching modulation, abrupt harmonic changes and unexpected outbursts are only the best-known example. Even though, in a performance of a *fantasy,* the audience is aware of the fact that the musician is performing a score, the performer must deliver and the public listen to these pieces *as if* the music was invented in the moment of the performance, as if the musician herself was still searching for musical solutions, always risking losing herself in the modulatory movement. The comparison with traditional theatrical art here is again helpful: If an actor plays a role in such a way that the audience has the feeling that the protagonist himself already knows what is going to happen next, his interpretation is quite certainly a failure – or a Brechtian defamiliarization. The fact that the play is written in advance does not mean that the drama appears as something that is predetermined (which does not mean that actions expected by the public cannot be, in some circumstances, the key to the success of a performance).

A musical interpretation of a composition can take on the appearance of an open process. It then reproduces a productive activity. The matter of whether the composing is happening right now or has been done previously doesn't matter for the improvisational quality of the sonic appearance. This *improvisational quality* or *character* is the aesthetic sense of improvisation that is

independent from a theoretical and practical understanding of the scene. Our knowledge (or belief) that a performance is improvised does not guarantee that we appreciate the sonic structure as having an improvisational quality. And, conversely, the very same improvisational characters might be appreciated in a composition. It is revealing in this context that even Heinrich Schenker – not exactly an open-minded thinker – claimed that the masterworks of the German tradition from Haydn to Beethoven should be perceived as improvisations. He defended, in other words, the idea that these very iconic cases of musical compositions are products of genius artists insofar as they manifest an improvisational character (Schenker 1996). It is, therefore, an irony of history when Alperson turns the Schenkerian argument upside down in order to claim that an appreciation of the music *as productive activity* was the specificity of our attitude towards non-composed music.

Lydia Goehr's notion of *impromptu* can be taken as another kind of an improvisational character: The *impromptu* "refers to what we do at singular moments – *in the moment* – when we're put on the spot, particularly when we're confronted with an unexpected difficulty or obstacle" (Goehr 2016: 459). Yet, it is perfectly possible for an actor or a musician to stage such a moment of unforeseen decision-making, to play as if she was put on the spot. There is a sense of urgency and surprise in such a situation of discontinuity, the sudden attention from the crowd, the danger of the ridiculous that can only be turned into victory by wit, presence of mind, quickness. Hence, it is an aesthetic category that characterizes a certain type of complexes of appearances.

In order to summarize this section, one can say that, first, there isn't only one improvisational character that artistic performances may or may not display, but there is a multiplicity of improvisational properties that are highly dependent on the artistic context, on the expressive means and that ends in question. As aesthetic categories, these characters cannot be pinned down to isolated features or sets of non-aesthetic properties, but can only be circumscribed through paradigmatic examples and rich descriptions (I will mention another example in the last section of this text).[15] Second, it is possible that a non-improvisational production displays a certain improvisational character that another, actually improvised performance completely lacks. The improvisational, as an aesthetic attribute, relates in this respect to the product of a performance, not to the action as such.[16]

3 Towards a Materialist Conception of Improvisation

3.1 Improvisation as Artworks

There is no substantial difference between the aesthetic appreciation of improvisations and compositions insofar as they are experienced as artworks. The concept I want to argue for takes artworks in general to be artifacts whose internal aim is to correlate with aesthetic judgments. It is the particularity of aesthetic judgments that they neither identify nor evaluate the entities they are related to, but that they relate a reflexive pleasure to their object: One judges that a complex of appearances is convincing, coherent or staggering beyond any measure or rule. The question of whether the work can be re-identified as being *the same thing* over time is of no importance for the *aesthetic* question of whether it is an artwork at all – works of fixed sound (Chion 2009), interpretative performances of scores or non-interpretative improvised performances (Ruta 2017) can equally be regarded as artworks.

In this understanding of the term, the aesthetic judgment is not identifying nor subsuming. It does not apply a rule, concept or generality to a singular case, rather, it reflects upon a complex of appearances. This reflection is open-ended and is accompanied by a feeling of pleasurable tension. If there is no such pleasure, the aesthetic judgment is negative and the complex of appearances in question is no real artwork, only a failed one. However, it is notoriously difficult to specify what

the aesthetic reflection consists of, besides the very general description given by Kant in saying that the aesthetic object puts sensual, imaginative and conceptual capacities in play. The materialist conception of the aesthetic I intend to put forward starts from the idea that such a reflection is historically situated: Sensual, imaginative and conceptual capacities have a certain plasticity and undergo historical transformations. This is why artistic procedures change over time in order to incite a pleasurable tension in the reflexive appropriation. The sensibility and schemes of understanding, and the expectations and questions the audience puts into play in the encounter with an artwork are the historical conditions of the artistic production. The artistic working process consists of an elaboration of a form under the specific conditions of reflection at a certain time in history. The pleasurable reflection of the aesthetic judgment can, in this way, be correlated with the reflexive relation that the material form of the artwork manifests. If this is true, the improvisational character one appreciates in a sonic appearance must equally vary in the course of history. In this last section, I want to argue that Adorno's notion of the artistic material is apt in attempting to grasp this historical malleability of aesthetic sensibility. It allows one to conceive of the historical context of artistic reception as something that is not external to the artwork, but that represents an internal aspect of the artwork itself.

3.2 Improvisation as Material Form

The particularity of a materialist understanding of art lies in the idea that an artwork results from the transformation of a historically formed material that bears tendencies of its own. In this sense, the artwork displays not only a sensible form, but a relation between form and material: the artwork's concrete appearance is a response to the demands of the material it uses (Adorno 1973: 222, 2003: 38–42).[17] The term "artistic material" does not refer to a naturally given stuff but is meant as a relational term – material is always formed material, form is always materialized form. The material of an artwork is whatever the latter is made of – the historical conditions that are transformed through the subjective effort of the artist. But these conditions are themselves produced by previous artistic elaborations and include highly abstract items such as tuning systems, harmonic structures, pictorial conventions, semantic relations, performative strategies or even social functions, and, of course, also the technical and natural possibilities at a certain moment in history. In this sense, the materialism I endorse is similar to that of contextualism, but with two important differences: First, the material is not exterior to the artwork – like a context in which it is embedded – but it is what the elaboration of the artwork transforms. It is not information that can be merely given in a program note, but, rather, is experienced as an internal aspect of the artwork. And second, the material is not a neutral environment: Whenever an artist forms a material, he works with possibilities and potentials that are in no way inert. The material resists the subjective act of forming, it has tendencies on its own. These tendencies are twofold: On the one hand, as a product of expressive labor, art is the objectification of subjective intentions, wishes, demands and hopes, but also of tensions, contradictions and conflicts. Therefore, in using a certain material, the artwork necessarily responds in some way to the objectified subjective demands that have been sedimented within that specific material over the course of history. However, these potentials and tendencies are correlated with the historical capacities of perception: The artistic material is an objective, but nevertheless socio-historical, category. One cannot freely choose what tendencies one wants to react to, as they are the objective result of the historical development of art. On the other hand, as an expression of human intelligence, art is allergic to repetition. The material, therefore, bears a tendency towards renewal. In this respect, Adorno's materialist conception of art is inherently tied to the basic idea of the avant-garde: art is always new art. This tendency is manifest in the phenomena of the outworn: Artistic material loses its expressive potential and falls into conventionality.

There are tendencies, longings, striving, desires and demands in every material an artist uses – and every form can only partially comply with them. The thought or ideal an artwork expresses can be understood as the conflictual inner relation, the tension between the material and the way it is synthesized – the form. The aesthetic appreciation of the artwork can be explained as the pleasure that exists in grasping the non-propositional thought that is materialized in the inner tension of the work.

Within such a framework, the question of the improvisational character of an artwork has a historical and even geographical dimension. A sequence of sounds might appear improvisational in a certain idiom, but might completely lack the quality of liveliness, surprise or looseness associated with improvisation as soon as it is part of another artwork that uses a different material. The far-reaching modulation that bears an improvisatory quality of an open-ended exploration in a fantasia of C. P. E. Bach has no improvisatory character in the constructive work of Brahms. While the non-aesthetic question of whether a performance is improvised or not has no historical dimension (given a unified concept of what counts as improvised action), the aesthetic conception of improvisation is closely tied to the historical development of the artistic means of expression. This in mind, I would like to turn again to the example I began with: the improvisations of *Musica Elettronica Viva*. What is the historically unique *aesthetic* character of improvisation that these musical performances invented?

3.3 An Example: The Flux of Concrescence

Fortunately, there is a recording of an improvisation by the MEV that has been published under the title *SpaceCraft,* a performance that took place in the Akademie der Künste in Berlin on October 5, 1967. Even though this recording is more of a document of the work than a work of fixed sound, it reveals some of the aesthetic interest of this type of collective improvisation. The musicians collaborate in the progressive fine-tuning of a cyclic sound texture, marked by a recurring bass impulse. One hears, so to speak, the coming-into-existence of a series of complex sonic atmospheres that are constituted by repeating but fluctuating textures. The character of these harsh textures is of a dream-like heaviness, the long reverberation giving an impression of floating while the slow but steady recurrence of the bass impulsion bears a disquieting sense of fatality. The specific durations of the decay of these electronically modified impulsions are the determining principle of the interaction, together with a slowly progressing intensification: the texture rises in waves, augmenting density, volume, noisiness and pitch. At the peak of this development, which is attained around the middle of the piece, events driven by "inspired autism" abound. The improvisational setting allows the musician to become absorbed into the particular sonic possibilities of their instruments, pushing certain techniques to the limit without listening anymore to what happens around them. This long moment of frenetic activity slowly disintegrates until the end of the performance. The musical bow form – intensifying a texture of cyclic layers that reaches a climax and then falls apart – has of course become a cliché of free improvisation. But this formal strategy is convincing insofar as it allows the musician to explore the surprising sonic effects and interactions of the electronic devices, with their possibilities of feedback and distortion, of textural fusion and interference. The produced time structure manifests the character of a disquieting and yet promising exploration into obscure dimensions of the sonic material, a venturesome attempt to sound the matter of sound. Such a process of experimentation aims at moments of astonishment when one is almost frightened by the sonic structure that happens to be created. This explorative improvisation is not so much a conversation between individuals – as the discourse on improvisation so often suggested, in a classicist manner – but a collective attempt to follow the demands of the sonic material even when these demands contradict each other. The aim of the constructive effort seems to be the display of fine-grained differentiations and variations within every sonic texture.

The performance can, therefore, be seen as a response to two tendencies of the musical material: On the one hand, the interest in drones and static textures prolongates the lines of investigation opened by the works of Giacinto Scelsi. He introduced a completely new conception of composition: Instead of integrating sonic events into a coherent sequence of sounds, Scelsi – who was said to engage a whole staff of people to transcribe what he improvised on the piano – was searching for a way to compose the inner structure of a single sound: how to blow up a sonic singularity in order to differentiate it from within?

On the other hand, the performance of the *Musica Elettronica Viva* can be heard reacting to a contradiction within the serialist approach to electronic composition. The aim of serialism was the integral determination of the sonic structure. It was driven by the promise of a musical web of relationships that attains the highest degree of density by means of rational organization: the quantification of the sonic parameters. Within this paradigm, sonic events are determined by means of discrete scales of the different aspect of the sound: duration, pitch, color, articulation, volume. But the experimentation with electronic sound production has shown that the complex of qualities that are referred with concepts such as *timbre, color* or *articulation* cannot be treated in a discrete way. The rationalization of serialist planning, therefore, turns into an irrational procedure with regard to textural qualities – it is pseudo-rational. This is, on a technical level, what Curran and Rzewski called the lifeless quality of electronic music. The blatant irrationality of their improvisational performances reacts to this pseudo-rationality of serialism. When it comes to sonic textures, one could paraphrase, it is more rational to be irrational that to rationalize in vain. In its aesthetically convincing moments, the performance of the MEV pushed forward the process of material differentiation that was blocked by serialist planning. This type of improvisation can therefore be interpreted as an aesthetic strategy that responds to the demands and potentials of electronic music – hence the name of the collective – and it is the electronic recording technique that, in turn, allows these ephemeral experimentations to be, at least, documented.

The aesthetic idea that is expressed through such an ephemeral improvisation in cyclic layers of fluctuating textures that intensify and disintegrate can be, metaphorically, captured by the uncanny promise one might associate with the Whiteheadian notion of "concrescence" (Whitehead 1978: 208–18)[18]: An unintentional, material process of growing together, a flux that gives rise to something like a particularity beyond the opposition of subject and object. The apparent lack of coordination associated with and produced through the collective improvisation in *SpaceCraft* thereby becomes an internal factor of the specific synthesis of appearances this artwork proposes. The enfranchisement of seemingly uncontrolled individual intentions leads to an unintentional quality of appearing totality – and this fluctuating concrescence is one possible aesthetic sense of the improvisational. The appearance of sonic concrescence is an improvisational character that is bound to the historical material the artwork puts into play.

Several, even contradictory political interpretations of this complex of appearances seem possible: there might be an affinity with the utopian thinking of anarchist libertarianism or to a naturalization of social processes, but also a trace of the revolutionary awe in front of emerging collectives. Whatever line of interpretation one chooses, the idea I wanted to present stays untouched: composed music might just as well – or even more radically – manifest the same kind of improvisational character. The irreducibility of this aesthetic dimension to theoretical or moral considerations lies at the ground of the artistic endeavor in general – and, in this sense, it is the condition of possibility for any particular solidarity between art and political liberation.[19]

Related Topics

Baldini, A. L. (This Volume) "Street Art and the Politics of Improvisation."
Canonne, C. and Saint-Germier, P. (This Volume) "Improvisation, Actions, and Processes."

David, D. (This Volume) "Appreciating Improvisations as Art."
Gartmann, T. (This Volume) "Repeatability versus Unrepeatability in Free Improvisation."
Saladin, M. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Political Emancipation."
Wallace, R. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Poetry."

Notes

1 This does not mean that aesthetic qualities are *merely subjective*: aesthetic judgment claims validity and a certain kind of objectivity. However, this aesthetic objectivity cannot be reduced to the realm of objectivity that theoretical judgments are able to grasp. Therefore, I remain to some extent neutral with regard to the theoretical divide between the realism and antirealism of aesthetic properties.
2 I use the concept of appearance in the broadly phenomenological sense of what is given in experience. This notion doesn't exclude conceptuality and is not identical to the concept of mere semblances: Appearances can deceive, but they can also be the appearance of what is.
3 See, e.g., the statement by Alfred Zimmerlin ("We are happy that we can concentrate completely on the music today, without any ideological ballast and without having to be revolutionaries") and the debate on the "end" of free improvisation in Gartmann's contribution in this volume.
4 Artworks can be appreciated for theoretical or practical reasons. Aesthetic appreciation, however, is primordial. For a defense of this claim, see Stephen Davies (2005).
5 This does not mean that the idea that improvisation is somehow related to political emancipation has totally disappeared from discourse or that it has no legitimacy at all, cf. Saladin in this volume. My target here is a specific understanding of the emancipatory potential of improvisation that was crucial for some specific artistic practices of avant-garde improvisation in the 1960s. As will become clear by the end of the chapter, my criticism is meant to rethink and not abandon the idea that art and liberation are related.
6 Cf. on the notion of "Überraschungszenarien," see Matzke (2014: 171–6).
7 For a criticism of Froger's view of improvised cinema, see Collins (2019).
8 For a similar argument with regard to literature, see Wallace in this volume.
9 Cf. Schönberg's idea of the historical relativity of the consonant/dissonant distinction (Schönberg 1922: 14–9).
10 Levinson's remark that the postmodern Stamitz sounds "funny" is not convincing – the act of composing such a piece might be ridiculous, but that does not make the composition funny.
11 I say "usually" because there are conceptual works of music that turn propositional context knowledge into the very material of the artwork, see the cases discussed by Bertinetto (2016a: 67 f).
12 For a similar critique of Alperson's distinction, see the text of Saint-Germier and Canonne in this volume.
13 This does not exclude that some considerations developed in this text can also be applied to other, non-performative kinds of art. But this is a subject that goes beyond the limits of this study. For a preliminary discussion on this point see Baldini in this volume.
14 An alternative defense of the "mistakes" in improvisation can be found in Bertinetto (2016c) and David Davies' contribution to this volume.
15 This statement depends, of course, on a certain conception of aesthetic categories; see, e.g., Gorodeisky and Marcus (2018).
16 There is, however, one important limitation to the claim that the aesthetic sense of improvisation is a question of appearance: As soon as the performers enter into a substantial interaction with the audience, they actually have to improvise. However, in the case of music, it is rather exceptional that the performers interact *musically* with the audience.
17 I follow the interpretation of Hindrichs (2013).
18 Using such a general, metaphysical notion as *concrescence* that does not have primarily a musical sense, opens the possibility to apply it in other artistic fields, such as, for example, the choreographies of Sasha Waltz with their contrast between mechanical repetition and seemingly improvisational processes of assembling bodies.
19 I thank Marcello Ruta for the inestimably helpful discussions that made this text possible.

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14

THE EXPRESSIVITY OF MUSICAL IMPROVISATION

Philip Alperson

1 Phil Woods

On September 29, 2015 Phil Woods died. Often compared to such giants in the field as Charlie Parker and John Coltrane, Phil Woods is generally regarded to be one of the greatest jazz saxophone players in the history of the genre. He was known for his meticulously crafted improvisations, his phrasing, his technical mastery of his instrument, and especially his pure clarion tone. It seems rather uncharacteristic, therefore, to hear on beat four of bar twenty in his improvised solo in Mel Tormé's version of the Stevie Wonder song, "All in Love is Fair," Phil Woods fluffing a note.

Was this simply an uncharacteristic mistake? Musical improvisation is, after all, a demanding activity and, as with all other human activities, people make mistakes. In what follows I hope to show that the way we go about answering this question about what at first blush seems a simple mistake sheds light on how we understand the multivalent concept of expression in music.

Before we get ahead of ourselves, however, let us pause to look more closely at Woods's solo. An improvised solo is, of course, best actually heard in its realization in time, either live or recorded, and for this one can consult the recording, "Mel Tormé: The London Sessions."[1] As is characteristic of many of Woods's improvisations, this one presents itself as a marvelously-shaped melodic line from beginning to end. The solo begins with a mellifluous, languid quotation from the opening notes of the melody, developing with increasing melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic intensity that culminates in a burst of technical virtuosity about three-fourths of the way through, ending in the final measures with a return to soulful lines that mirror how the solo began. Woods's solo is a piece of improvised musical architecture, a lovely arc not unlike a bell curve.

There is, however, the matter of the fluffed note, which occurs seventeen bars into his solo. The four bar section in which the fluff occurs can be seen in Figure 14.1

It is clear what Woods is doing here: he creates a two-beat phrase and he plays with it. He states the phrase in the first two beats of the first measure, he more or less repeats the phrase in the second two beats of the measure. In the second measure he plays the phrase again and he finishes with a phrase somewhat different but still clearly recognizable as a variation on the first phrase. So the first *two* measures of the line have a melodic arc with the structure: A A A A'.

Woods then starts to work out the same pattern over the third and fourth measures, except that when he gets to the second statement of A in the third measure he fluffs the last note. On the basis of the improvised melodic development, which has not strayed far from the tonal centers of the harmonic background and, given the G minor (Concert Bb) vamp in the background, we expect

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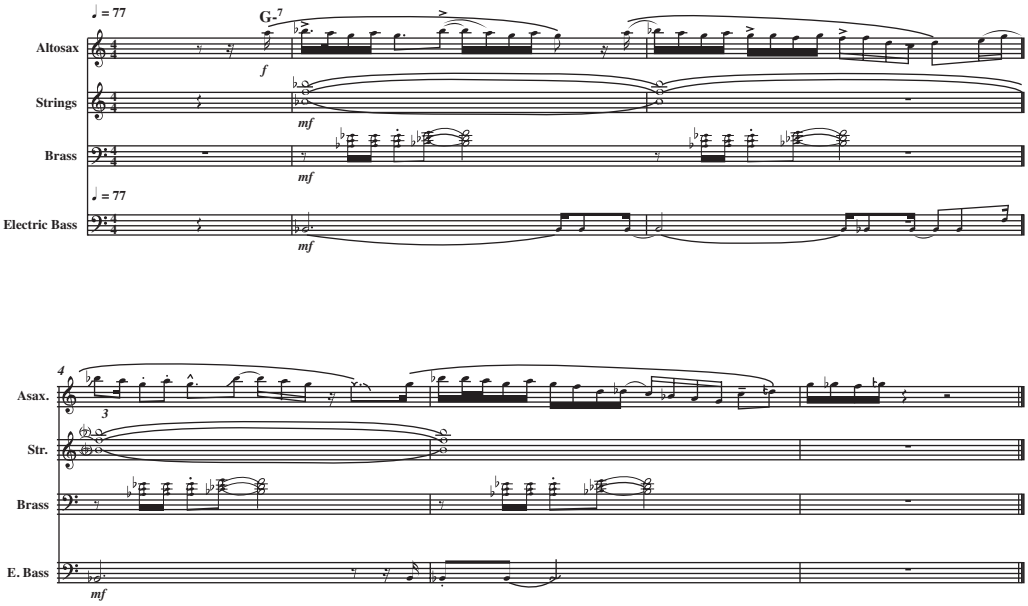
Figure 14.1 Excerpt from Phil Woods's solo.

Figure 14.2 Expected note from Phil Woods' solo.

Figure 14.3 "Fluffed" note from Phil Woods's solo.

Woods to end the phrase by landing on a G, as he had done in the previous iterations. And we expect this to be done in Woods's characteristically clear tone.

What he was going for can be seen in Figure 14.2.

What we get is instead is something like a hoarse cough (Figure 14.3).

I have been calling this note a fluffed note. Was it simply a mistake? Was it a clam?

To be sure, the note represents a departure of some sort,[2] not least a departure from the musical expectations a listener familiar with the tone and craftsmanship of Phil Woods could reasonably be expected to have. Woods was, after all, the kind of session player who could be counted on to fly cross-country to nail a solo on the first take. Indeed, Woods was not just the *kind* of player who could be counted on for such a performance, he was the living embodiment of such a player.

A well-known anecdote circulates among jazz musicians: Donald Fagen of Steely Dan fame flew Woods from New York to Los Angeles for what he expected would be a difficult overdub for the tune, "Dr. Wu." Woods's first take solo – now widely regarded as a classic – was impeccable. Fagen was stupefied. Woods was in and out of the studio in half an hour and returned to his hotel to await his red-eye return flight to the East Coast. He called the adventure "stealing without the risk."[3] The point is not that an important recording could have been made without extensive rehearsals. (George Benson's career-making rendition of "This Masquerade" was an unrehearsed first take.) The point is rather to try to understand Woods's "fluff" in the context of his utter command of the instrument and the music he was known to produce.

I think we would be wrong, however, to regard Woods's "fluff" *simply* as a mistake. I want to argue, rather, that the key to understanding this event – as a musical one – is to understand it in the context of musical expression. Keeping the Woods example in mind, then, let us turn our attention to the question: what is musical expression?

2 Musical Expression

I take "musical expression" to refer to the myriad connections between music and the affective or emotional life. Understood in this way, expression is one of the most familiar, pervasive, and, one must say, bewildering aspects of musical practice. Works and pieces of music are frequently described in expressive terms. Composers and performers are said to express themselves through their music. Musical scores frequently contain what are called "expression marks" and verbal directions such as "espressivo" and "con espressione." Even musical instruments may be described in terms of the range of expressiveness of which they are thought to be capable: early 20th century versions of mechanical "reproducing" player pianos that had the capability to control tempo, touch, and volume were called "expression pianos." Teachers encourage their students to "play with expression." Listeners often take the expressive dimensions of music to be among the most important features of their experience of music and they freely use emotive terms in their phenomenological descriptions of their musical experiences. Music itself is said to be an expressive, if not the most expressive, art. These attributions together attest to the widespread belief that music and expression – in some sense or other – are intimately connected.

So, if expression is so widely associated with music, how *are* we to understand the connections between music and the affective life? In what follows I will start by briefly identifying certain key strategies that philosophers have adopted to address the question of expression in music. I should say that the matter of expression in music is one of the most heavily discussed topics in the philosophy of music. I make no pretense of offering anything like a comprehensive overview of the field. I rather want only to touch on certain themes germane to topics of musical expression I wish to explore. After sketching these lines of thought I will turn to some of the substantive and procedural presuppositions about modes of musical understanding that ground these theoretical strategies, examining some aspects of musical expressive practice that philosophers have generally regarded as marginal. I will argue that these "marginal" aspects of musical expression are important to understanding the ways people create, appreciate, and value music.

3 Skepticism about Expression

I should note at the outset that not all philosophers suppose that, properly understood, expression is a component of music. Skepticism about musical expression is typically fueled by one or both of two worries, both of which have their most famous modern formulation in the works of the Austrian music critic Eduard Hanslick. (Hanslick 1986) According to the first worry, it is argued that expression in music is, strictly speaking, impossible. According to the second, expression,

were it even possible, is said to be musically irrelevant. I note these skeptical views. I want, however, to set them aside for present purposes, which I do for the following reasons.

First, the worry that expression in music is an impossibility rests on just how one understands what expression is. Hanslick, for example, famously offers two possible supporting arguments for the skeptic, arguing, first, that music is incapable of representing what he calls "definite emotions" such as love or fear as subject matter, in a manner analogous to the ways in which literature and painting are said to be able to represent features of emotive life. Secondly, Hanslick argues that music is incapable of arousing, evoking, or otherwise causing emotions to be felt by the listener, at least with any kind of regularity. If, however, one could show that Hanslick was wrong on either or both of these counts – if one could offer an alternative workable theory of musical expression – then we would not be drawn toward the skeptical conclusion that musical expression is an impossibility. And, as we will see, plausible theories of musical expressiveness are not hard to come by.

Similarly, the skeptical argument that expression in music, even if possible, is irrelevant depends not only on the details of the theory of expression but also on how one understands the nature and function of music and the mode or modes of creation, appreciation, and understanding proper to it. Here again, Hanslick is thought to provide support, arguing that the content of music – properly speaking – is formal, which he famously parses as "tonally moving forms" and which he thinks is exclusive of the kinds of emotions commonly associated with musical expression. In Hanslick's view, references to emotions are accidental or "external" to the music itself. But again, this is a position that demands a philosophical and a musical defense. Indeed, as we shall see, contemporary philosophers have argued that expression, in some suitable sense, is something that can be predicated as a property or an aspect of music, as something properly belonging to the music, what Jerrold Levinson calls the "externality requirement" (Levinson 1996: 91).

Finally, with respect to skepticism about expression, we have to contend with the weight of the testimonies of so many composers, performers, listeners, and critics that attest to the relevance – if not the centrality – of expression in music, as well as the near ubiquitous use of emotive terms by so many people in their descriptions of music.

Now it may be that the use of expressive linguistic descriptions of music is metaphorical, as some have argued. But, again, the sense in which emotive linguistic descriptions are metaphorical is something that requires elaboration and defense. It may well be that it is sometimes difficult to find the exact form of words to capture the fine nuances and shadings of the expressive qualities of works. But the same can be said for the difficulty of finding satisfactory descriptions of our emotional experiences in general – and we do not dismiss expressive language on that count. So let us leave skepticism aside and turn briefly to a bit of familiar territory regarding some philosophical approaches to musical expression.

4 Philosophical Theories of Musical Expression

Much philosophical attention has been directed toward the question of understanding musical expression as a feature of pieces of music, considered objects of awareness to listeners. Consider for example the well-known adagios by Giazotto and Barber. We might say of Giazotto's famous *Adagio by Albinoni in G Minor*, which has been used as background music for scores of films and television series, that it is "sad," "sorrowful," "pensive," "heartbreaking," and so on. Or one might say that one of the central properties of Mussorgsky's well-known *Night on Bald Mountain* is that it is "scary," "fearful," "angry," or "unsettling." The "Spring" movement of Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* seems, overall, a "happy" piece of music. To be sure, these are somewhat crude, perhaps overly broad descriptions of the pieces in question. One might say, for example, that about a minute into the "Spring" movement of Vivaldi, the emotive tone of the piece shifts from some variant of happiness to a feeling of light apprehensiveness. And perhaps it does. But note that to ask for a

more fine-grained emotive description is to appeal to the fundamental supposition that emotive descriptions of musical expression are apt.

And yet, as many philosophers have noted, there remains a puzzle about this way of speaking about music: We have a sense that we know what it means to say that a person is happy or sad or fearful. We know this in part from how such words seem to apply to our own personal experiences. We say that such emotions have, first of all, a characteristic "inner" felt dimension. And, in the case of the so-called "definite emotions" such as love or fear, we think that these emotions are tied in some way to an intentional object appropriate to the emotion in question. We love someone. We fear something. These kinds of experiences are part of what defines us as sentient beings. But how can we make sense of our habit of ascribing expressive properties we normally attribute to conscious beings to a non-sentient thing such as a piece of music?

One promising approach begins with the claim that certain musical features *resemble*, in important ways, certain features of human expression. It has been claimed, for example, that such musical features as melody, rhythm, and harmonic development can resemble such expressive human features as the contours of the expressive human voice (Kivy 1989; Ridley 1995) or perhaps the phenomenological "shape" of felt emotional experience (Langer 1953), or gestures or other outward behavioral manifestations of human expression (Kivy 1989; Davies 1994).

However, we may ask, if there are such resemblances, how are the connections between aspects of human expression and musical expression established? One possibility is that listeners become cognizant of the expressive dimension of music, without necessarily feeling any particular emotion. According to Peter Kivy's well-known version of this "cognitivist" view, listeners recognize or hear the resemblance in the music. We hear the music as being sad, much in the way that we see sadness in a St. Bernard's face or in the look of a weeping willow tree. We know the St. Bernard's face is sad, even when the dog is wagging its tail.

In Kivy's view, two conditions underwrite our ability to hear music in this way. First, there is the general propensity of human beings to animate or see human qualities in animate and inanimate objects by virtue of the similarity of musical and expressive contours. Second, there is the influence of accumulated conventions within a musical culture that associate particular musical phenomena with emotional states (such as the tradition of using major and minor keys in music whose titles or representations are associated with happiness and sadness) (Kivy 1989).

Kivy's positive theory makes no reference to feelings evoked in or actually felt by the listener. Indeed, since Hanslick, it has been somewhat commonplace (among philosophers, anyway) to dismiss the idea that we might understand musical expression in terms of the emotions that musical pieces might arouse in the listener. Hanslick's worry, we recall, is that there is simply no causal nexus – no necessary connection – between an expressive piece of music and the particular emotions it might evoke – in part because (or so Hanslick argues) definite emotions are tied to particular cognitive content that is beyond the means of music (or instrumental music, at any rate) to supply.

Now it is an interesting question whether emotions evoked in listeners *are* as capricious as Hanslick says. But apart from that consideration, we should be cautious, solely on the basis of Hanslick's worries, about ruling out consideration of any kind of felt emotional experiences associated with musical expression. Jenefer Robinson has argued, for example, that perception involves what she calls "affective appraisal" – a non-cognitive process "that occurs prior to and independently of any cognitive evaluation." Affective appraisals in general, in Robinson's view, are processes that cause physiological responses that serve the purpose of picking out and focusing attention on objects and events that matter to us, reinforcing our assessment of them as good or bad, threats, things to like, and so on, and preparing us for appropriate action (Robinson 2005: 41 ff., 97; see also Prinz 2004).

What is especially interesting about Robinson's suggestion, for our purposes, is that – unlike Hanslick, who regarded aroused emotion as irrelevant to hearing the piece of music as music – she

argues explicitly that evoked emotion has a role to play in the interpretation of the music, which she does by way of the concept of an expressive musical persona, positing that we hear a piece of music as the expression of psychological states in a musical persona or character. Robinson's position is that music "evokes emotional responses, and by cognitively monitoring or reflecting upon those responses, we can come to grasp the structure, of the music as well as what it expresses" (Robinson 2005: 348). Note that, as a psychological hypothesis, "affective appraisal" occupies the same explanatory space as Kivy's invocation of the "animation" thesis of aspect perception – our tendency to see human qualities in inanimate objects. In both cases we have a psychological theory that plays an explanatory role in how people experience musical expressiveness.

Robinson's theory raises a number of interesting questions, including that of whether there *are* such things as "emotional 'appraisals' that are automatic and in some sense immune to 'higher' cognitive intervention" (414), whether we can defend the view that one can "understand expressiveness partly through the emotions it evokes in us" (366), and whether emotions – in life or in art – are one of the vehicles through which we focus our attention on things (126).

There is more to be said about philosophical approaches to the question of musical expression in pieces of music. We have not, for example, fully examined the distinction that might be drawn between "definite" emotions and moods – a distinction that would have direct applicability to the matter of music expression, not only in the context of musical improvisation in jazz, but in music, generally speaking.[4] For present purposes, however, I shall turn to the matter of the substantive and procedural presuppositions about modes of musical understanding that ground such theoretical strategies.

Let us note first the fundamental and familiar insistence, made by most philosophical commentators, that a convincing account of musical expression must be shown to be "aesthetically relevant." This requirement is part of an overall view of music that sees it as an aesthetic practice centered on the creation of certain sorts of objects – musical works of art – the specifically musical features of which are thought to consist in their disposition to present aesthetic qualities appropriate to modes of attention and evaluation involving a disinterested aesthetic experience.

This view, as Paul Kristeller has argued, has its roots in the birth of the so-called "Modern System of the Arts" in the 18th century, when it was proposed that there was a group of arts – the "fine arts" – that possessed a common thread by virtue of which they formed an affinity group (Kristeller 1965). This view reflected the contemporaneous rise of performance venues such as court salons and concert halls, where composers, performers, and listeners were seen as engaging in the collective activity of the presentation and appreciation of repeatable works that could be appreciated in requisite ways. Artistic expression, which in the 20th and 21st centuries has come to be parsed as aesthetic expression, came to be regarded as the glue that held this affinity group together. Musical works, then, are understood precisely as aesthetic objects created by composers, made repeatable and available to listeners in performance, by means of a notation that makes possible performances faithful to the score and, hence, to the work. If the work is not a fully worked out form in the composer's mind (as Hanslick had it), it is nevertheless some sort of structure, entity, or type that is the product of the composer's musical conception. Audiences listen in the appropriate way for the work through the performance. Listeners (and critics), in this view, are construed along Humean lines as people aspiring to the ideal of taste: true and disinterested judges possessed of a delicacy of imagination and practiced in making judgments appropriate to musical works of art. Musical expression is judged artistically significant precisely insofar as it can be appreciated in this context of disinterred attention.

This focus on musical works of art is congenial with certain methodological tendencies of analytic philosophy, most especially a naturalistic orientation toward observable entities and their properties and the rigorous analysis of concepts and statements that might be clearly and meaningfully asserted about the ontology of these entities. Analytic philosophers have accordingly been concerned with questions about the meaning of works of art and their ontology, the nature of their

properties – notably formal, expressive, and representational properties – and a range of musical practices concerning musical composition, performance, understanding, and criticism centered on purely "aesthetic" considerations.[5]

We might also observe that the aesthetic orientation of philosophical approaches to musical expression is congenial with a specifically formalist view of music. We saw this in the case of Hanslick who, with a mild qualification – what he calls the "the analogy of motion," similarities in the dynamic qualities of music and emotion – rejected the idea of musical expression tout court. But the case for the compatibility of musical expressiveness and musical formalism can be made, as for example Peter Kivy has done, by offering a view we might call "enhanced formalism," the idea that expressive qualities can themselves be appreciated from an aesthetic point of view in the ways in which they are part of and contribute to the fundamentally formal aspects of a musical work (Alperson 1991).

It is also worth noting that there has been a tendency among some philosophers, whether formalists or not, to focus on examples drawn from the tradition of so-called "pure" or "absolute" instrumental music, specifically European instrumental music in the so-called common practice period, composed in Europe roughly between 1600 and 1900. It is an interesting question to ask how this emphasis on "absolute" music is justified. Of course one might not explicitly defend the choice of examples and simply stipulate that this is one's interest, saying something in passing about "the music I focus on here." Or one might offer a justification of the focus on absolute music on procedural or methodological grounds by claiming, for example, that because "absolute" music lacks an accompanying text, it presents the most difficult problems for philosophers, or that solutions to the problem of expression are likely to be more easily evaluated "in the pure case," or by offering an assurance that the expressiveness of "pure music" will play a role in the expressiveness of "impure" music." I do not find such claims particularly convincing but I will, in the present context, have to pass on examining them.

Notice, though, that the emphasis on absolute instrumental music has its consequences. One of the most fundamental presuppositions that grounds the aestheticist approach to music, especially insofar as illustrative examples are drawn from the classical instrumental repertoire of Western absolute music, is the idea that music is an auditory art. Now of course, in an important sense, music is an art of sound. That is a natural plain fact and to deny this would simply be perverse.

But let me push the matter of some of the ways in which the conception of music as an auditory art affects our understanding of musical expression. It is certainly true that one can strive to attend imaginatively to the intentional world of tones, listening to the organization of pitch, rhythm, melody, and harmony, in musical gestures and motions in musical time and space, as Roger Scruton (Scruton 1997) and others have so eloquently demonstrated, as well as to matters such as orchestration and tone color (see Dodd 2010). Attending to the development of musical sounds, especially in their historical context, can be richly rewarding, engaging one's awareness of many facets of musical sound. Consider the range of musical and expressive experiences called forth by the classicism of Mozart and Haydn, for example, as compared with the range of experiences enabled by the increasing chromaticism, the movement away from tonality as an organizing principle, and the breakdown of the notion of cadence in, say, the early works of Schoenberg. Clearly one can strive to adopt what is sometimes called a "sonicist" approach to music, focusing exclusively on works of music as "*sound-events*" whose properties are purely acoustic in character (Dodd 2007).[6] The rewards of this kind of attention can be glorious and profound.

5 Bodying Forth of Human Action: Music as Performative

But is this the whole story? My own view is closer to that of Stephen Davies, who argues that "composers, musicians, and listeners typically hear through music to the actions that go into its production […]. We appreciate sounds as providing information about their sources rather than for

their intrinsic qualities." As Davies puts it, music is "the auditory bodying forth of human action" (Davies 2008). It is my view that listening to music is precisely attending to a particular kind of human action – a performance – whether we are confronted by an actual live performance, a recording of a live performance as on a CD or captured on a video clip, or whether we are attending to music through the attenuated medium of a score. Music is, I believe, a manifestation of human activity.

6 The Growl

In this regard let me return to the Phil Woods example. I think I know how Woods's fluffed note came to be.

Jazz musicians frequently manipulate and play with tonal timbre in their improvisations. One technique players sometimes employ is a kind of tonal growl. It turns out that there is a particular way to produce a growl on reed and brass instruments: one constricts one's throat and hums while playing. This sounds easy but it is extremely physically taxing to do.

Now, as I mentioned, one of the characteristics of Woods's playing is the clarity of his tone. And if one listens to the entire improvisation in "All in Love is Fair," one hears him strategically deploy this timbral effect throughout the solo, moving between his characteristically clear tone and various degrees of the growl.

I believe that the note I was calling "fluffed" is a part of the overall expressive arc of his solo.

It is possible for listeners to miss the expressive qualities of the growl in music especially if we think of musical performance in terms of the range of more or less "pure" tones that we associate with particular musical instruments. But the growl – or raspiness or throatiness – in both instrumental and vocal music is often the carrier of expressive content. Perhaps this is so because in hearing the musical growl listeners resonate with human timbral resonance, creating a kind of sociality of affect.[7] Not surprisingly, this is an important feature of vocal performance. Consider, for example, the expressive qualities of the raspiness of Louis Armstrong, or the guttural quality of Tom Waits, the velvety sound of Nat King Cole, the leatheriness of the later Leonard Cohen, the brilliant open tone of John Coltrane's tenor saxophone as opposed to the breathy flutelike quality of Paul Desmond's alto, or the earthy quality of the later recordings of Rita Coolidge. These are prominent features of what we hear when we listen to these performers. In many cases we can recognize who the performer is within an instant of hearing them sing, in large part due to the timbral quality of their voice.

I think what happened in the case of Phil Woods's solo is that as he was building his solo in intensity, melodically, harmonically, and rhythmically, he started to deploy the growl more heavily. The accumulated effect of the sheer effort required to manipulate the tonal timbre got to Woods and the note I highlighted did not quite come out as one that – perhaps even Woods himself – was expecting. But, I would argue, even this eventuality reflects something of the overall expressive development of this piece, which I would characterize as something like an organic increase in ardor or fierceness – which emerges in part because of the interplay between tonal purity and the tonal growl. We hear what I have called a "fluff" as part and parcel of the intensifying effort and urgency in the overall expressiveness of the solo – even though it is likely that Woods did not actually intend to fluff the note in that way. Woods intended to use the growl effectively; he did not intend to fluff the growl.[8]

Put more generally, I would argue, there are aspects of music that become absorbed into the expressiveness of the music and I am arguing that not only the growl but also the fluff count as examples of this sort of expressive phenomenon. To regard what happens here as a "mistake" does not do justice to what is happening, either phenomenologically or musically. Calling Woods's note a mistake is an example of what the philosopher Gilbert Ryle famously called a "category

mistake" (Ryle 1949), in this case a confusion of ontological, phenomenological, expressive, and musical dimensions.

In this regard, it is important to remember that Woods's improvised solo is a particular kind of musical action – a musical improvisation where the performer is foregrounded and where the performer takes primary responsibility for the musical "product" in so far as the "product" just is the action of the performer. The performer is not foregrounded precisely in this way in the case of composed music that originates in a score and is presented in a tradition that enjoins artists to perform the music with a high degree of fidelity to the score. In that tradition we have a more focused – though not ironclad – idea of a mistake as consisting of a wrongful, unacceptable, or disruptive departure from the score. We have, in the case of the performance of composed music, a different kind of action, perhaps even one that is the action of the composer, heard in the music. The performer's responsibility is guided by a stronger obligation to the norms of musical re-production.[9]

That said, I would maintain that even in the case of the performance of composed music, we do not completely lose a sense of the performer's action. When we hear Janos Starker's performance of Bach's "Suites for Solo Cello," we are able to hold simultaneously in mind aspects of the composed music and aspects of the performance, much as we can have a simultaneous "two-fold" awareness of the surface and of the pictorial content of a representational painting, as Richard Wollheim has argued (Wollheim 1987). Even when we hear Starker's breathing we listen through the performance to the work while still paying close attention to the performance – in such a way that the performance does not elide the work. One might even say that in improvised jazz, the notion of a pre-composed "work" fades away. I once attended a performance by the acclaimed jazz organist Joey Defrancesco. At the break, someone asked Defrancesco, "When did you write that piece?" "Just now," he answered.

But let me return for a moment to the growl so as to reflect on several important epistemological and causal questions. How do I know, for a start, that my account of what was going on when Woods found himself producing the growl is accurate, especially since I do not and did not have access to Woods's mind and inner experiences?

My answer is straightforward: I am a saxophone player and I am familiar with the tradition. I know how one produces a growl on a saxophone. I know how taxing it is do this. Just as I know the distinctive sound characteristics and resistances of plastic versus cane reeds or of Rico cane reeds versus Van Doren cane reeds, or Otto Link and Meyer mouthpieces or Rovner ligatures, or the range of sounds and playing characteristics of Selmer versus Yamaha saxophones. Woods played a Meyer mouthpiece on a Selmer Mark VI saxophone manufactured in the 1950s. I know that setup. Nor am I alone in having such a range of specialized knowledge. Perhaps what I know about saxophones you know about Bösendorfer, Steinway, or Fazioli pianos. Or Lorée or Bulgheroni oboes. Or Rickenbacker, Fender, or Martin guitars.

Now it might be objected that my own listening habits – and the mode of informed attention to which I am implicitly appealing – confuses paying attention to the causes of the sounds with paying attention to the sounds themselves. For that reason, it might be objected, my appeal to the mode of production – the kind of instrument used, what is required to produce sounds on the instrument, and so on – is irrelevant to the music itself. I do not however, agree with the sonicist premise of this objection. I believe that musical practices often involve more than exclusively sonicist considerations, more than what the sonicist might call "the sounds themselves."

7 Music as an Audio-Visual Art

Let me elaborate on this. I think an argument can be made that music is not simply an audio art form but is rather an audio-visual art. Certainly in the case of attending to music as it is performed, either in person or by means of a visual recording, our perception of musical sounds is mightily

affected by our visual perception of such things as bodily movement and gestures, as recent empirical and philosophical studies have demonstrated. Musical expression, in particular, can be realized across various sense modalities, including the sonic and the visual.

Indeed, as Bergeron and Lopes have suggested, it may be psychologically impossible, at least in some cases, to distinguish, in our experience of performances, those expressive qualities that belong to the musical sounds and those that belong to the audio-visual aspects of music (Bergeron and Lopes 2009). Consider for a moment the effect that different conducting styles – and I am thinking here of posture, the movement of the hands and arms, and physical bearing in general – might have on our musical experience. Bernstein, for example, tended to conduct in grand sweeping gestures as compared to the much sparer movements of Riccardo Muti. We notice which musicians the conductor cues and which she admonishes. Even the question of whether the conductor conducts with or without a baton can influence how we perceive the music. It is as if, through these visual and behavioral cues – the chironomy of musical performance – the conductor helps establish a "sound-picture" by means of gesture. Along similar lines, we attend to the gestural styles of performers in both solo and ensemble performances.[10] This is no small part of our awareness of musical presentation.

In saying that there is a visual component of musical perception I know that I am appealing frankly to a psychological hypothesis. But, as we have seen in the cases of Kivy and Robinson – not to mention many other philosophers too numerous to list here – the appeal to psychological considerations is hardly a novel move. Nor is it a suspect one. My view is that philosophical accounts of music must square with both our intuitions about music and with whatever psychological processes underwrite our perception, our understanding, and our appreciation of music.

Here is another consideration. One objection to the account I am offering might be that because I am a musician – and a jazz saxophonist, in particular – I have a range of specialized knowledge that we cannot expect other listeners to have. Certainly not all listeners – not even all jazz musicians – are privy to the knowledge of how growling sounds are produced on the alto saxophone.

In response to this worry, I maintain that there is a sense in which it doesn't matter whether or not a listener knows how to produce a growl on a saxophone. One can hear the growl and hear the increasing intensity and ardor in the sounds. And in the case of witnessing a live performance, and even in the case of some records of performances, by means of a YouTube video for example, one can sense something of the effort involved.

8 Musical Embodiment and the Range of Appreciative Practices

But this observation reminds us of another important dimension of musical practice that some sonicist and some cognitivist views of musical expression tend to elide. Musical practices are embodied. We may speak of an element of embodiment, not only in the performer's action – to which I have just called attention – but, if something like Jenefer Robison's position is correct, we may say that musical perception and musical understanding are embodied – even apart from the question of specialized knowledge about the modes of musical production. I take this point to be related to the larger research program in cognitive science and the philosophy of mind on the "embodied" and "extended" mind and "distributed cognition" that explores ways in which the brain, the body, and world collaborate in various aspects of thinking and knowing. (See Noë 2009 and Clark 2011)

The question about the specialized nature of my remarks on Phil Woods's solo bring us to another observation. I want to insist on the range of appreciative practices in music.

First, I want to insist on the variability of the population of the class of listeners. Some people are jazz saxophone players, some are not. Some jazz saxophonists are familiar with the stylistic

tradition of the tonal growl in jazz improvisation, others are not. Some people are familiar with performance practices of particular genres or historical periods, others are not. French horn players are wont to pay special attention to the French horn section. Some listeners have very little in the way of specialized knowledge of the sort I have described. To put the matter another way, while one can rightly speak about what Jerrold Levinson has called "musical literacy" (Levinson 1996) and while it is also true that within particular traditions and styles certain features may be regarded as standard, contra-standard, or variable, to use the language of Kendall Walton (Walton 1970), as a matter of practice, people bring to the table a great range of capabilities, backgrounds, interests, knowledge of genres and performance practices, and so on.

This does not mean that in the case of musical judgment anything goes. What constrains the admittedly wide range of interests and abilities of listeners is the fact that musical practices arise in particular historical, cultural, and ethnological contexts that provide not laws, but norms that guide our habits of performativity, understanding, appreciation, and critical judgment. This context enjoins us to operate in matters of musical understanding with the guidance of what we might think of as a musical version of a hermeneutical "principal of charity," according to which we interpret the various aspects of musical performance in such a way that they help us understand the overall expressiveness and musicality put forward in a particular musical activity.[11]

I do not, of course, mean to imply that expressiveness in music is always a good thing or that the more expressiveness, the better. The expressiveness card can be overplayed in the case of both composed and improvised music. Paradoxically, too much expressiveness can result in inexpressiveness, as in the case of kitsch.[12] Just as in the representational arts such as literature, painting, film, and drama, where oversentimentality can have a kind of distancing effect, so too may oversentimentality in music. The orchestral introduction to the version of "All I Love is Fair" in which Phil Woods solos may be an example of that. Performances can also suffer from over-expressiveness. Performers become histrionic at their own peril. There may also be cases where musical expression passes over from expressiveness in the composed music or in performance into the representation of expressiveness.[13] The Albinoni Adagio, which some have regarded as a kind of pastiche or imitation of late 19th-century Romantic compositional devices, may be an example of this: the music is expressive to be sure, but it also paints a picture, as it were, of musical expressiveness in such a way that we notice or even reflect on the phenomenon of musical expressivity itself. Mussorgsky's *Night on Bald Mountain* may arguably be an example of overdramatic expressiveness that features emotive topographies of apprehensiveness, shock, and horror. Finally, and speaking more generally, it is a fascinating and important question – that space does not permit us to pursue here – of the extent to which our judgments of expression in music are affected by cultural and historical consideration, as well as our individual familiarity with musical matters such as genre, and indeed our personal inclinations and proclivities – some people are more open to expressiveness than others. There are, I would venture, important matters of social epistemology at work here.

9 Variability of Music Practices: Aesthetic Mono-Functionality

The acknowledgement that musical practices submit to a variety of interpretations and functions brings us to another point. As much as I appreciate the profound rewards of attending to "purely" musical development, I do not hold to the view I would call "aesthetic mono-functionality" – the idea that music has only one function and related set of values, that this function and realm of associated values is tied exclusively to "purely" musical properties, and that the question of musical "relevance" is to be understood only within these parameters. I wish to argue, rather, that philosophical accounts of musical expression need to take into account the deep diversity of musical practices and functions that music serves in the complexities of the social, moral, political,

and cultural spheres (Alperson 2014), to what I would call the deep "instrumentality" of music in concrete human and social contexts, not only in Western cultures but in musical practices worldwide (Alperson 2008).

10 Phil Woods again

In this regard, let me return to Phil Woods one last time. I heard Woods perform live four months before he died. Eighty three years old and a victim of emphysema, Woods had to be helped on to the stage. He played seated – which was not his prior practice – an oxygen canister next to his chair, oxygen tubes connected to his nose. He still managed to play with the same ferocity I had heard in his recordings going back nearly sixty years.

Like many others in the audience I was there to listen to his music. But, like the others, I was also there to pay homage to this great musician who had contributed so much to the tradition of improvised jazz music. The music and the entire musical occasion – the social rituals of being together with others who share a love of music and of honoring a life in music – these all have expressive dimensions that are musically and emotionally rewarding. As I have tried to argue, appreciating a musical performance is, in its fullest sense, a matter of appreciating a manifestation of an embodied human activity. But musical improvisation, in particular, reveals a distinctive range of human activity, one that goes beyond the already difficult challenges of, say, being able to sight-read a demanding passage or being able to perform a previously composed piece of music or being able to perform music expressively in any of the multitudinous senses we have considered above. There is something about musical improvisation that puts before us an instance – an exemplary instance – of the fundamental spontaneity and creativity of living a life, perhaps even of celebrating the very joy of living. This is something that characterized Phil Woods's mastery of the practice throughout his life and that was on full display especially as he fought through the maladies he faced in his last few months. Theories of musical expressiveness need to make room for all these expressive aspects of musical practice.[14]

Notes

1 M. Tormé, M. *The London Sessions*, DCC, Compact Classics DJZ-608, 1977). Also available at www.youtube.com/watch?v=ODp188SczK8 (accessed October 24, 2020).
2 I thank Bettina Varwig for pressing me on this point.
3 See http://www.jakefeinbergshow.com/2013/10/jfs-127-the-phil-woods-interview (accessed October 24, 2020). A similar story is told about Woods' famous haunting solo on Billy Joel's "Just the Way You Are," done in just two takes.
4 On this see Bertinetto (2019).
5 The account given here follows my exposition in Alperson (2016). The professional philosophical focus on the ontology of artworks can be seen in the kinds of articles published in such leading journals as *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* (*JAAC*), the journal of the American Society for Aesthetics (ASA). In the first fifty years of the *JAAC* – during which time the ASA moved from being an interdisciplinary society whose membership included philosophers, psychologists, anthropologists, artists, and art historians to an institution predominantly populated by analytic philosophers – the JAAC saw a 475% increase in the number of articles published on the ontology art, far outstripping the growth of any other topic. On this see Goehr (1993: 114), table II. See also Goehr (1992).
6 Nelson Goodman, who understands musical works as classes of sound events complying with scores may also be considered a sonicist. See Goodman (1976).
7 Thanks to Denise Elif Gill for this nice suggestion.
8 I thank John Deathridge for pressing me on this point.
9 I thank Roger Scruton for pushing me on this point.
10 I thank Marcello Ruta for drawing attention to this point.
11 I thank Jerry Levinson for suggesting that we think of musical understanding as a site for the operation of the principle of charity, even if I may have taken his application of the principle in a different direction than he might have intended.

12 I thank Andreas Dorschel for this important observation.
13 I owe this intriguing suggestion to Deniz Peters.
14 I wish to acknowledge my deep thanks to Deniz Peters, Andreas Dorschel, Margareth Tumler, and Noel Carroll for their help and encouragement. I also thank Claudia Döffinger for her expert assistance with the musical transcriptions and the participants of the "Expression and Self-Expression" conference at the Institute for Music Aesthetics in Graz for their many suggestions, some of which I have been able to incorporate into this chapter. I would also like to thank Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta for their many, very fine suggestions.

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15

JAZZ IMPROVISATION, AUTHENTICITY, AND SELF-EXPRESSION

Garry L. Hagberg

The intellectual movement called existentialism, bringing with it a way of both selecting and methodologically approaching philosophical issues, claims Nietzsche as its conceptual progenitor for good reason. In the small book Nietzsche described as a piece of dynamite, *Twilight of the Idols*, he asks the reader from the outset, "Are you genuine? or only an actor? A representative? or that itself which is represented? – Finally you are no more than an imitation of an actor" (Nietzsche 1982: 26 f.).

1 The Concept of Authenticity and the Work of Thelonious Monk

This profound challenge is one concerning authenticity (which became a central concept in post-war existentialism) and, as in so many of Nietzsche's passages, it functions in a sense contrapuntally. First, we encounter the concept of the genuine, and that immediately implicitly introduces its opposite, the false or fake. And this distinction then awakens self-reflection concerning the times we have powerfully and forcefully spoken unambiguously about our deepest concerns in life, and the times we may have hedged over toward dissimulation, concealment, or pretense of one subtle kind or another. And so we move to the next concept explicitly stated in Nietzsche's challenge: an actor. That then awakens the image of a convincing portrayal of a character on a stage or in a film. We are led to believe in an actor within the narrative world of the work of art, yet we know that character to be – in an underlying sense that we set aside while viewing it – false. But then something more complex is awakened here as well: we know what it is to recognize something that a character does in a film or play as out of character – where, precisely because we are speaking of an actor, there in fact is no character. That is to say, we can make distinctions between what seems in line with a person's style or mode of being and what doesn't, and we can do this – albeit even paradoxically in its own way (because we see the consistency or lack of it in an entity we, strictly speaking, know not to exist) – often in a very fine-grained and detailed way. Or one could say that the consistency of character is real, while the character itself is not. Nietzsche's challenge, thus, has a rapidly thickening plot. And so his third concept is that of a representative, which now awakens its distinctive images and connotations. In political life, a representative is a person whose fundamental task is to stand, as one individual, for the interests of a collective (in the corridors of power the individual will be present and the collective absent; but again the concerns, majority decisions, and preferences of the collective are present in the voice of the representative). Such representational work can be done well (where there is an alignment between the representative's voice and the collective will) or poorly (where self-interest displaces

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the expression of the needs and preferences of collective body), but while this issue of good or bad representation is implicit, it is not Nietzsche's most fundamental concern when it comes to this concept. Rather, he is concerned with the nature, or one may say logic, of the representational circumstance itself. During a trial, the defense team of an accused person has used such a thing as a character witness: a witness may not know as a matter of direct fact whether the person accused is innocent or not, but they do know that the alleged misdeed is not within the bounds of possibility for that person, because of who that person is. The testimony of the character witness concerns the integrity of the individual within the narrative continuity of that life. (Surprise in these terms is where we use phrases such as, "I had no idea this person was capable of such a thing," where the proven act goes against what we thought we knew of that person, and thus where that proof profoundly changes our understanding of the person; in short, we believed the act to be true.) The evaluation of a representative (and here is Nietzsche's concern) is not like this. Rather, the criterion for success will always be by definition outside the personal life of the representative – the valued alignment occurs when the voice of the representative is, in a sense, ventriloquial, voicing something that comes from a source external to that person. Or: to act (note the specific use of the word "act" here) as a representative is to express what one is not. (This logic holds whether the representative agrees with the collective consensus or not; in cases of agreement, the representative is voicing her or his individual position only as a member of that much larger collective.) And so, turning to Nietzsche's next concept: "that itself which is represented." The genuine was polemically placed against the actor; here the representative is placed against that which is represented. Charlie Parker was, as we say, an original – he created and mastered, to the highest degree, the bebop idiom or style. That white-hot creativity then functioned in precisely the way Kant described as "giving the rule" by the creative artistic genius to the subsequent generation of players who, like mannerists in architecture or painting in a sense, "speak the language" of Parker as they develop their artistic trajectories. (Speaking another's language is, in this music-improvisational sense, intrinsically ventriloquial.) And what many players have humorously (and sometimes not so humorously) termed the "jazz police" were players so devoted to the bebop style that any departure from it was regarded as a moral failing that invited sternly corrective criticism. They were representatives. Parker, by contrast, was "that itself which was represented." (It is for this reason, to which I will return, that the very idea of a *follower* of Nietzsche is oxymoronic.) But one final stage: Nietzsche's challenge concludes by digging one level deeper into the self-destructive abyss of inauthenticity. "An imitation of an actor" is a problem doubled: an imitator is by definition not, in Nietzsche's and the existentialist's sense, genuine. The actor, one supposes, possesses a certain skill and technique and is able to act in a way that is, to an outside observer, convincing; an imitation is often readily discernible as just that. So the imitator of an actor is thrice removed: there is the genuine article, Charlie Parker; there is the actor, the many players who work exclusively in his idiom, epitomized in an unfairly exaggerated form by the "jazz police"; and there is the weak simulacrum of the strong simulacrum.

So now we have a start in seeing how a central concept – authenticity – drawn from proto-existentialist thought might illuminate some issues in jazz improvisation, but we would do well not to stray too far from detailed examples or case studies. If one thinks of the words "genuine" and "original" – words brought into a descriptive context that includes the concept "representing nothing other than itself" – the name Thelonious Monk comes to mind.[1] It is difficult to imagine (as it may not be so in various other cases) anyone who knows a good deal about the art of jazz disagreeing with this. And that limit on the imagination is instructive: it shows that this is an extreme, or exemplary, case. What does this tell us?

When Monk recorded one of his early compositions, "Well You Needn't"[2] in 1947 with Gene Ramey on bass and Art Blakey on drums, he was in the middle of the musical articulation and stylistic consolidation of post-war bebop. Yet his stylistic vocation, both as player and composer, was

decidedly different, the work of a person apart, and indeed unique (and for reasons I will come to shortly, it remains so to the present day). Even at this very early stage of his recording career, one can unmistakably hear Monk himself: the melody, the head, itself has an arpeggiated ascent to its high point, at which it falls a perfect fourth. The second phrase of the melody repeats the ascending arpeggio, but then answers the antecedent first phrase by ascending to a lower pitch, dropping a major 3rd. The third phrase of the melody repeats the first with its high-point drop of a 4th, but is then answered not by any arpeggio but by a quickly repeated ascent and descent of a perfect 4th, placed on the starting pitch of the first arpeggio. Taken together (0.1–0.15), all of this tells us we are already in a distinctive melodic world where 4ths and disjunct interval leaps are powerfully sense-making but not in any sense melismatic, or what we call melodious or "singable" in a traditional way. But what Monk puts in the left hand of the second A-section (essentially repeating the eight bars of the first A-section) tells us even more still: while playing the head in the right hand, he puts a chromatic ascending line into place beneath it. This tells us we are now in a compositional world where melodic passages can be supported not only by traditional jazz chords, but also by counter-lines moving not step-wise within diatonic harmony but, indeed, chromatically – where that chromatic movement also powerfully creates musical sense but again of an unexpected kind (0.15–0.25). The effect is to insinuate a destabilizing chromaticism into what is otherwise a chord progression (F7 for a bar; F#7 for a bar – where because of the tritone substitution the F#7 functions with a double harmonic identity, working both as a half-step up from the tonic chord and as a dominant chord pressing back to the tonic; F7 for a bar; and then Eb7 for a bar) that is fairly straightforward. And that left-hand chromaticism unto itself functions as a counterbalance to the wide interval leaps in the melody, so rather than an antecedent-consequent relation, Monk here intimates a thesis (wide intervals in the head) and antithesis (half-step movement in the chromatic line) relation. But we quickly see that this itself is only a harbinger of what is coming at the bridge (0.25–0.35). The chord progression of the bridge, the B section of the AABA 32-bar form, rather than taking on any structure reminiscent of, for example, "I Got Rhythm" (A7 for two bars, D7 for two bars, G7 for two bars, ending on C7 for two bars which takes us back to the tonic of F), goes into a series of chromatic rising and then falling dominant 7th chords, here explicitly and openly realizing fully what the previous left-hand chromatic line subtly insinuated. And they function all the way through the bridge with double identities – they are half-step neighbors to each other and, at the same time, work in dominant-tonic relations. And the melody of the bridge has no chordal arpeggios; rather, it is a sequence of perfect fourths up and down following the trajectory of the chromatic 7th chords beneath, and so this develops – and makes central – what were in the A sections the end-clips of the arpeggiated melodies. It is as if that interval, contained within the A section, emerged and took over the bridge.

Following a repeat of the A section (0.45–0.45), Monk begins his improvised solo. The first section (0.45–0.59) is not a solo that works in the interest of melodic or melismatic continuity – and so in this sense he is playing from the melody, if not quoting it exactly. That is, Monk is not finding melodic *lines* through the changes as the bebop style characteristically does (e.g., like Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Bud Powell); instead, he is working by establishing, and then following out, the internal logic of small motifs that are as much rhythmic-percussive atoms as they are melodic gestures. This is important in articulating a description of his style because what Monk does is often best described in contrast to what he is deliberately – and, in its own way, powerfully – not doing. At one point within this improvised solo it is as if he suddenly increases the power of a microscope – he moves into a way of playing that might be called micro-logic (0.59–1.14). Here very small fragments are treated to their sense-preserving development in a microcosm that encapsulates his larger aesthetic within it. But then here again, Monk creates tension between the right and left hand, and thus between his harmonic and melodic layers. The left hand, with tightly voiced block chords, suddenly interrupts (1:15–1.17) the melodic-fragment

proceedings, with chords taking over the solo just as his perfect fourths took over the bridge. What transpires shortly thereafter calls for the word "relentless"; here the improvised thematic logic becomes chordal (1.20–1:41) rather than single-note, with that logic being rhythmic as much as it is harmonic. To round out the form, Monk returns to small motifs (1.56–2.03) with all the sparking intelligence we have seen up to this point, returning to the head out (2.36) that we now hear as the material that contained within it all of the possibilities of development that we have seen unfold.

Nietzsche famously said, just before the passage with which I began, that "Without music life would be a mistake" (Nietzsche 1982: 26, remark 33). One might say now that without figures like Thelonious Monk, musical authenticity would not be what it is. I will return to this below, but we see throughout Monk's musical work, from his earliest recordings in 1947 to his retreat from public life after 1976, a consistency of musical character that is, in the sense Nietzsche discussed it, genuine. There is never a hint of the fake, the compromised, the cheapened, or the diluted. Monk's improvisation exemplifies integrity within musical creativity, but also more than that – it reaches out into the integrity of character, where the boundary between the aesthetic and the ethical blurs. In the notes written for a CD compilation, Peter Keepnews said, "Jazz is a music that celebrates individuality, and some of its greatest figures made their mark by rewriting the rules in the interest of self-expression. But there have been few jazz musicians as thoroughly individual as Thelonious Monk."[3] To be *thoroughly* individual is precisely what Nietzsche was addressing, and it is this upon which existentialists fixed. That is, acting never comes into play; Monk is never a representative and, in Nietzsche's terms, Monk in and through his music is "that which is represented."[4] The character witness sees what is out of bounds for a defendant independently of a direct incontrovertible alibi. We will see more about this below, but even from this early recording one can see that Monk will very probably be one to never speak in any ventriloquial relation to any other voice. Keepnews continues,

> And he was stubborn. He settled on his highly personal approach as a young man and stuck with it throughout his career, regardless of changing fashions in jazz. As a result, his music gradually went from being widely regarded as too far-out for most listeners to being dismissed by many critics as old-fashioned. Two decades after his death in 1982 […] it is clear that it was neither: it was simply, as the title of one of his albums put it, Monk's music.

An actor, for Nietzsche, is inauthentic by virtue of being what one is not.[5] And an imitation of an actor – Nietzsche's lower level still – would be a player who rides a wave of a popular style in a calculating way, imitating the voices of players who are themselves ventriloquial. Figures like Monk tower above that world, and they provide the measure, the standard, against which we can measure inauthenticity and see it for what it is. Keepnews writes, "To listen to Thelonious Monk is to hear the unmistakable sound of a musician being himself."

But Nietzsche has been, as I mentioned, claimed as a proto-existentialist. What light can the philosophers central to the development of existentialism proper cast on the question that asks what it is as a jazz improviser to play who you are?

2 Existentialism and the Making of a Self-Identity in Music

In his *Existentialism and Human Emotions* (Sartre 1993: 10), Jean-Paul Sartre writes that "what can be said from the very beginning is that by existentialism we mean a doctrine which makes human life possible and, in addition, declares that every truth and every action implies a human setting and a human subjectivity." The consideration of every human action, understood in his terms, brings with it inseparably a human setting. This is to say that the understanding of any action as

chosen (we will come to the subject of choice below) by a person requires a comprehension, an awareness, of the relevant details of the context (the "setting") in which that action is performed. This is not a small matter ethically, and I want to suggest that neither is it a small matter aesthetically. If we were to take, as an ethical model, the categorical listing of prescribed and proscribed actions as defined generically or in a trans-contextual way, we would then see ethical action as the following of general rules as applied to particular cases. The details of the particular circumstance would thus be "noise," the general rule the "signal"; we would then want to cut down the former to the fullest extent possible, and amplify the latter so that it in a sense stands alone in its trans-contextual way. Sartre understands the ethical insensitivity – and indeed the moral blindness – that this model entails. In contrast to this model, Sartre sees both the ethical action and the ethical choice of the action as intertwined with the context of the action to such a degree that the action, and the choice, cannot fully or accurately be described without those details. So far, that is saying a lot, but it is not all he says; in addition, he sees human subjectivity as equally indispensable to moral understanding. This is to say that the mental contents, the cognitive stock, and the phenomenological experience and reflections of the person choosing the action are part of what make the action what it is; these details are not merely superadded to the action, they are, for existentialism, constitutive. As Sartre says, the shared point of agreement of all existentialists is "that subjectivity must be the starting point" (Sartre 1993: 13).

But then one is led to ask: what is the source, the origin, of this subjectivity? Is it given as the first fact of human existence, or is it created or in some way, cultivated as itself, a fundamental temporally extended human project. Sartre's answer is nothing short of what he calls "the first principle of existentialism": "Man is nothing else but what he makes of himself" (Sartre 1993: 15). It is in the light of these thoughts that the slogan, "Existence precedes essence" takes on meaning. He summarizes the point so: "But if existence really does precede essence, man is responsible for what he is" (Sartre 1993: 16).

If selfhood, if what we are, is a direct function of what we do, what we think, what we choose, what we acknowledge as influences and precedents, what we do to reshape those precedents into what fits our identities, what we reject, what we pursue, and ultimately what we carry within us as who we are, then the autonomous or self-directed making of a self runs perfectly parallel to the making of a musical identity and (as we say) the finding of a voice. But in Sartre's view, "finding" is not quite the right term here. The use of that word suggests that it is there and we come across it through exploration or searching. The existentialist view is more active and supplants the concept of the discovery of identity, of a voice, with the internally generated creation of identity and voice. If the existentialist credo is, "Existence precedes essence," then the credo for improvised jazz might be, "We are what we play." But before returning to Monk and the musical instantiation of these thoughts, there are a few more Sartrean issues we need to weave into the fabric here.

With everything that Sartre has said so far in place, "there is no explaining things away by reference to a fixed and given human nature" (Sartre 1993: 22 f.). That is, we are not what we are by virtue of some shaper of our lives outside of ourselves. "In other words, there is no determinism, man is free, man is freedom" (Sartre 1993: 23). *Man is freedom*. With those words, Sartre encapsulates another tenet most central to existentialist thought and another extremely direct link to improvised jazz. Improvisation does not offer choice to a player – it demands it. But it is at this point that Sartre introduces a wrinkle: we are not offered the gift of freedom. Rather, as he famously says, we are condemned to it. What he means is that, because we did not cause ourselves in the first instance to be born, to exist, we do not freely choose in a pre-existent state to have that freedom once we are existent. That one initiating event – our birth – was not our choice. "Condemned, because he did not create himself, yet, in other respects, is free; because, once thrown into the world, he is responsible for everything he does" (Sartre 1993: 23). But everything else, for Sartre, is our choice; choice, in the moment and across a lifespan, is the instrument, the machine,

of self-creation. In regard to those who claim that religious edicts or rules govern us and hence that our choices are made for us, Sartre observes that in any case we first choose those religious authorities and give them the power they then have over us. So any appeal to external authority will systematically fail – the very possibility of the existence of an external authority is an illusion. "No general ethics can show you what is to be done" (Sartre 1993: 28). This is self-responsible autonomy; it is the source of Nietzschean authenticity and is the experience, within every performance, of improvisers who play who they are.

We are, thus, in the world as are works of art.

> Now, for the existentialist there is really no love other than the one which manifests itself in a person's being in love. There is no genius other than one which is expressed in works of art; the genius of Proust is the sum of Proust's works; the genius of Racine is his series of tragedies. Outside of that, there is nothing.
>
> *(Sartre 1993: 32 f.)*

This seems harsh and reductive. Sartre made his two fundamental points concerning the indispensability of the context of an action and the human subjectivity that performs the action. So he is quick to correct the false impression, and the correction tells us something more about the intertwined nature of the ethical and the aesthetic. He writes,

> However, when we say, 'You are nothing else than your life,' that does not imply that the artist will be judged solely on the basis of his works of art; a thousand other things will contribute toward summing him up. What we mean is that a man is nothing else than a series of undertakings, that he is the sum, the organization, the ensemble of the relationships which make up these undertakings.
>
> *(Sartre 1993: 33)*[6]

Sartre, calling this an "optimistic toughness," is saying this: we may go through musical life saying that nothing we have actually done is who we are, and that the inner self has remained hidden behind a façade of outward work that is not us. That extreme case, where everything actually produced is disavowed in favor of an imaginary set of genuinely personally expressive work, for Sartre, is an illusion that prevents us from seeing the deep connection between chosen action and self-identity. Perhaps more than any other major jazz figure, Monk, for years, through the 1940s and into the mid-1950s, was criticized, misunderstood, and regarded as unskilled or inept by audiences accustomed to hearing Bud Powell, Lester Young, Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Max Roach, and so many other modernist virtuosi of the bebop school. As Tom Piazza expresses it, "Monk's response was that an artist needed to play what he heard, and the public would just have to catch up to him." And Piazza adds, completely rightly, "No one ever played piano in the way Monk did; his way had almost nothing in common with the European classical tradition. He used the piano as a tuned percussion instrument, in a way all his own." This is strength of character, strength of aesthetic identity, strength of choice for and against, and tough in precisely Sartre's sense. So again, we need to dive back into some of the details of Monk's improvised work to truly see this, but also again, we need one more fundamental observation from Sartre before proceeding. Sartre's passage warrants quoting at length:

> […] may I ask whether anyone has ever accused an artist who has painted a picture of not having drawn his inspiration from rules set up *a priori*? Has anyone ever asked, "What painting ought he to make?" It is clearly understood that there is no definite painting to be made, that the artist is engaged in the making of his painting, and that the painting to be made is

> precisely the painting he will have made. It is clearly understood that there are no *a priori* aesthetic values, but that there are values which appear subsequently in the coherence of the painting, in the correspondence between what the artist intended and the result. Nobody can tell what the painting of tomorrow will be like. Painting can be judged only after it has once been made. What connection does that have with ethics? We are in the same creative situation. We never say that a work of art is arbitrary; we understand quite well that he was making himself what he is at the very time he was painting, that the ensemble of his work is embodied in his life. The same holds on the ethical plane. What art and ethics have in common is that we have creation and invention in both cases. We cannot decide *a priori* what there is to be done.
>
> *(Sartre 1993: 42 f.)*

Let us enumerate what Sartre has captured here of the existentialist's way of seeing the connections between the making of art and the making of a self. (1) Artistic creativity is an active process within its own temporal frame and responsive to the interaction of the materials with which it is made; it is not a matter of "transcribing" into material reality a wholly preconceived idea or image. (2) The work of art, in the process of its creation, does not answer to values or criteria that precede the creation of that work; it is not a matter of matching a preconceived program or meeting expectations that are both logically and temporally prior to the work. (3) Values do appear, and they are relevant to the making of the work, but those values emerge within the process of creating it and are thus *sui generis* to the work in question. (4) No one can predict with any precision or accuracy how a work of art to be created tomorrow will unfold or what it will internally determine or call for in terms of its own structure. (5) All four preceding points apply with equal force to the creation of a self, the creation of an identity; aesthetics and ethics, in this sense, overlap. (6) The creation of a work of art is not arbitrary; but at the same time what is created follows rules that emerge only from within the process of making. The making of the self is the same. (7) The making of art and the making of a self are not only parallel – for the artist, they are intertwined in such a way that the making of the one is embedded within the making of the other. (8) The processes of the making of an identity and the making of art are inescapably matters of creation and invention; the creation of an identity is no more a matter of fulfilling a predetermined plan that is the making of an artwork. Art and life are far closer, and more creatively dynamic, than one might initially imagine.

"Man makes himself. He isn't ready made at the start" (Sartre 1993: 43). Monk, of course, composed his many pieces – virtually all of which have become jazz standards, deeply interwoven throughout jazz culture and as lasting as any – but those pieces are contexts or frames for improvisation that, in a manner of speaking, "make themselves." That is, precisely in Sartre's terms, it isn't ready made at the start. And so, we turn back to Monk, creating spontaneously within the frame of his own composition.

With a twelve-bar blues form rather than the AABA song form of "Well You Needn't," four years later, in 1951 Monk recorded his "Straight, No Chaser."[7] It begins with something seemingly simple – but it isn't entirely, and Sartre's fundamental thought gives us a way of describing it. The performance begins not with the head, not with everyone playing, but with twelve bars of the drummer, Art Blakey, playing almost alone (0.01–0.16), with nothing but the very sparse bass pitches sounded by Al McKibbon. Seemingly simple, but unobvious. What these sixteen seconds do is define what Sartre called the human setting, marking out the precise ground on which they will all walk together. It is twelve bars of rhythm given definition (with the harmonic territory minimally intimated by the bass), so that an awareness of this piece's time, and its divisions and subdivisions, are instantly shared by the players (they all know, and collectively wait for, precisely when to come in on the downbeat of the second chorus). Then, over this time-definition,

Blakey superimposes percussive attacks on the snare that both embellish the underlying rhythmic structure as given most centrally in the ride cymbal, and they all hear that and comprehend it as the kind of rhythmic figures they can use in their upcoming improvised solos over the twelve-bar form that rests beneath everything. Just at the transition leading, in a few seconds, into the head (0.14–0.16), Blakey plays a pronounced three on top against the underlying four, in a sense destabilizing the very foundation he just laid, resolving on the one of the first bar that starts the head (0.17). This "human setting" is defined, without question, and this temporal definition is shared, without question, but Blakey does not leave that definition without commentary, without inserting an internal challenge to itself. And so the setting in his hands is both stabilized (for ten bars) and destabilized (for two bars), intimating rhythmically what is to come both harmonically and melodically. But Sartre wrote of the conjoined necessity of the human setting and human subjectivity; this captures perfectly something that Monk does in the head. Played by saxophone (Sahib Shihab), vibraphone (Milt Jackson), and Monk, the head cleverly plays on the ambiguity of the 3rd in the blues. The first melodic fragment leaps from the 5th below to the tonic, followed immediately by the tonic moving up to the 2nd, the minor 3rd, and then up to the major 3rd, which is placed rhythmically on the "and" of four (that is, the eighth note following the last or fourth beat of the measure), which holds across to the first beat of the next measure – the effect is a kind of struggling climb to a very prominent major 3rd. The next fragment, however, is the same until it ascends, not to the major 3rd but to the 4th, then falls back to a very prominent minor 3rd that sounds over the IV chord of the blues progression (in the key of F, the IV chord is Bb7, which has a Ab as its 7th, which is the minor 3rd of F. But with the F7 chord being spelled F, A, C, Eb, the Ab sounds against it as a minor 3rd or, with the A sounding, a raised or sharped 9th). The remainder of the twelve-bar head runs through permutations on this ambiguity or tension between the A and Ab. That is what is happening as Monk, himself an "exemplary present subjectivity" in Sartre's terms, is harmonizing the blues progression in his left hand. (For the first chorus of the head, he plays it alone with bass and drums; for the second, the saxophone and vibraphone join him.) Sartre's point concerns the *distinctiveness* of the subjectivity that we must invariably acknowledge, and what Monk does remains distinctive – it remains instantly recognizable as Monk's approach – to the present day.

It is common for players (and this tune is played by virtually everyone in the jazz world) to spell the chords of the blues progression with 7th, 9th, and 13th dominant chords for the entire twelve-bar progression. That is, one conventionally stays within the jazz-blues language of dominant chords for the I, IV, and V chords, with substitutions that still make sense within a diatonic world expanded out from that standard blues foundation. Monk – like Blakey, in a sense, subverting what he has established at the end of his intro – hammers chords that are so altered (and not just extended) that they threaten to "turn over" the harmony; that is, some are so heavily altered with flatted 5ths, augmented 5ths, flatted and raised 9ths, and flatted 13ths, that one can't quite discern the basic chord, or even the basic function of the chord, in the cluster Monk is sounding out (0.25, 0.32, 0.37). Doing this as if the piano is a harmonic percussion instrument only heightens the effect and magnifies the power (0.42–43). Yet most listeners and all players know that we are still in a twelve-bar blues form, and so these must be dominant chords serving in function as I, IV, or V. But Monk does this so that this becomes more about what one knows than what one hears – he is improvising in the space between sound and imagination. And precisely at the moment of the close of the second chorus of the head, just before the improvised solos start (and, thus, the last possible moment), he plays what one expected but did not get all along (0.50), that is, the standard extended, but not altered, chord. This is only a microcosm of Monk's musical sensibility, but it displays sharply and precisely what Sartre meant by the need to maintain, from the existentialist point of view, an unmistakable presence of subjectivity. And in that last moment with a conventionally supportive left hand harmonization of the blues chord, Monk shows what Sartre called

a "necessary awareness" of the details of the context within which one is choosing to act; Monk knows what is conventional, what extends the bounds of conventionality, and what transgresses those bounds but in a way that is, nevertheless, logical or sense-preserving, musically speaking.

Like Nietzsche, Sartre also contrasted a traditional model of ethical thinking with the existentialist view. The traditional model holds that one first identifies a general ethical rule, formulates it, and then applies it when needed to any particular case; the rule itself will, in that sense, be trans-contextual. Sartre clearly discerned the moral blindness this conceptual model can instill, and he saw both the insensitivity to nuance and the reversion to unthinking rule-boundedness that it can inculcate. Monk recorded his "Blue Monk"[8] in a trio setting three years after "Straight, No Chaser" above. I turn to it because it, too, is based on a twelve-bar blues form, but represents clearly a direct improvisatory analogue of what Sartre is here discussing. Against the general-rule model, Sartre insisted on the importance of the individuality of the subjective mind, its distinctive cognitive stock, and the personal phenomenology one brings to any circumstance of chosen human action. One might summarize Sartre's position here by saying that we are complex persons, not moral robots or automata.

After playing the head (0.01–0.20) fairly – almost surprisingly – conventionally, Monk initiates his improvised solo, which itself, in employing frequent eighth-note triplets to begin a phrase (where those phrases are frequently in antecedent-consequent structure), is sometimes closer to the bebop idiom of Bud Powell than of Thelonious Monk. But at the start of his second chorus (0.41), Monk declares independence from the established bebop language, almost tricking the listener into expecting next what general rules concerning chord-scale relations would dictate about this particular harmonic context but just as quickly (0.46–0.53) he inserts sequences of percussively delivered cluster-chords that are anything but that. This distinctive approach is in Monk's cognitive stock, as what we can see he did with "Straight, No Chaser," and we can hear it in an informed way and understand his musical mind manifesting itself in this piece in that light. But here, after three more years of highly active identity-solidifying artistic development, playing now in a different blues composition of his but remembering, and having come from, "Straight, No Chaser," he starts the next chorus of his improvisation (1.02–1.22) with cluster chords in a powerful repetitive rhythm pattern that trades on the ambiguity of the major and minor third as discussed above (where those pitches are kept apart, kept distinct). But here, each of his chords through most of this chorus (1.02–1.16) includes, at the same time, both the major and minor 3rd. The predictable way to do this would be to play a 7#9 chord, so that the major 3rd is in the lower octave and the minor 3rd is in the upper. Monk's way is to jam them together, a clashing – but still innovatively sense-making – half-step apart. Sartre spoke of the moral blindness that comes from general rules; as the musical analogue, this is insight, this is vision, and the subjectivity and presence of cognitive stock is unmistakable. And so, also in Sartre's sense, existence here precedes essence: Monk is producing sound, manifesting sound, first, and the structural rules of harmony concerning how to stack notes and in what order are being set aside in favor of the sonic event of that moment. What Sartre spoke of as actively creating step-by-step, rather than finding preformed, an identity precisely describes what Monk is doing here.

But then Sartre also spoke of reshaping precedents in order to make them fit our evolving identities.[9] The Lydian 4th, the sharped 4th, is often used by jazz players on dominant chords, frequently as a passing tone up to the 5th or up to the major 6th resolving then down a step to the 5th, or less commonly, sliding down to the perfect 4th. Like a sculptor reshaping metal, Monk reshapes this in such a way that the sharped 4th is placed as the strongly accented downbeat – not a passing tone but the primary pitch of most of this entire chorus (4.48–5.01). That itself is strong, but then, of all things, now comes this: as he closes this improvised idea, rather than finishing the phrase with a strong tonic that re-establishes the authority and clarity of the diatonic key center, he ends the phrase on a sharped *tonic* – in the key of F, on a prominent F# (5.01). In any

guidebook to improvisation, one would never see this possibility so much as mentioned – it would be considered a mistake, to be avoided at all costs. But again, reshaping steel to suit his sculpture, Monk does precisely this, and he makes it work by momentarily lifting the melodic plane above its natural place with a fleeting moment of liberation from its normal harmonic shackles. In Monk's hands, the melody itself is condemned to freedom.

3 Choice, Volitional Autonomy, and Jazz

If we reach out beyond the work of Monk to the art of jazz improvisation more broadly, keeping in mind the eight fundamental theses concerning the existentialist's way of seeing the arts enumerated above, we might see the following:

1 Jazz improvisation is an artform that is not only suited to preserving a creative responsiveness to the interaction of materials within the process of performance – rather, it *demand*s it. The analogy with language here is deep and, without a conversation within sound, the improvisational collective voice cannot emerge.[10] And another point under this heading: one often thinks that only ensemble improvisation is interactive in this sense. But solo improvisation requires interaction with – indeed, a dialogue with – the materials-in-process.[11] The kind of interactive responsiveness internal to the work-in-progress that Sartre has in view is everywhere in this artform.

2 A portrait painting, in a way that is presumed within the genre, answers to criteria that are both outside and prior to the work. Of course developments take place within the process of creation, but there will always be both the subject of the portrait, and the presumption of some variety of representational verisimilitude discernible in the finished work. Jazz improvisation runs free of that governing expectation, and, as such, is again a central exemplar of what Sartre articulated. It may be true that a soloist "quotes" (to use the revealing word used by players) in an improvised solo a passage of, for example, Charlie Parker's, and so for that moment there seems to be a parallel external criterion outside the work – but that quotation is itself improvised and not preordained by the genre itself. Sartre's freedom is everywhere in this music – including the freedom to momentarily adopt external constraints.

3 For Sartre, the fact that criteria for the making and unfolding of a work of art are not established a priori does not necessarily mean that there are no values determining what is and is not right to do, but only that such values emerge within the process of creation. As we saw above, Monk follows out the logic of what has just emerged in the process of improvisation – but that logic, that sense of coherence, of thematic continuity, of developing a musical idea in terms of where (as we revealing say) it wants to go, is emergent within the work-in-progress and not superimposed as a trans-contextual template. This is what keeps the fundamental existentialist theme of choice, of volitional autonomy, at the center of improvisational jazz.

4 Sartre said that no one can accurately predict what a work will internally call for. This seems to repeat his previous point, but it actually does more than that. His point here, applied to the present case, is that if a jazz improviser initiates a solo with a pre-learned lick and follows it with strung-together pre-learned licks, that player may well produce an impressive-sounding solo, but it would not be the result of an interactive conversation, nor the result of a creative interaction with the materials, nor the result of a choice-making intelligence manifesting itself within the emergent work. To encapsulate: the existentialist work of art has more life in it than that. Both seasoned players and informed audiences can detect this difference quite quickly; one is choice-in-action, the other the mere appearance of that. Many soloists rely on what is, for them, a back-catalogue of licks, passages, familiar routes through chord changes, and the like; these can be applied to the circumstance of the moment in new and creative ways

(thus reshaping the materials as discussed above), or they can be applied in the manner of a general rule applied to an ethical decision. One is true to the existentialist vision; the other, however technically impressive, has a subtly deadening effect.

5 The creation of a self in the existentialist view, as we saw above, is far more active, far more autonomous, and far more a matter of freedom and momentary choice than might be imagined with other philosophical conceptions of selfhood in mind. And it is this model of internal self-determination that Sartre sees as deeply parallel to the creation of a work of art. From this vantage point, one could see the entire artform of jazz improvisation as a grand-scale mimetic representation of the nature of the self in the world taken *in toto*. Every artform of course allows freedom of choice and freedom of movement. But jazz improvisation, here again, does this to the highest degree, and – as we saw above – it does so not by protecting the scope for choice but by demanding it from the first instance. A classical player or conductor, of course, puts an individual stamp on their performance of a composition, and this is unquestionable creativity. A jazz player is *required* to do that – and much, much more. A person, through the development of a life, may strive only to conform to a pre-established model or pattern-life. Most would find that regrettable for what Nietzsche called its "life-denying character" ("Morality as Anti-Nature" in Nietzsche 1982: 42–6). The contrast then – the life-affirming – would be what we find both reflected and exemplified in live jazz improvisation.[12]

6 Sartre's observation concerning the free but at the same time non-arbitrary nature of a work of art brings into focus one central part of the discipline of improvisation: it can and has been understood as an artform that is free to a degree, where nothing counts as right and, thus, nothing counts as wrong. That is, an artform without discipline. This misunderstanding is interesting, because it shows how easy it can be to miss the intense discipline that is contained within the more visible freedom. In his famous liner notes to Miles Davis' *Kind of Blue*, the pianist Bill Evans wrote,

> There is a Japanese visual art in which the artist is forced to be spontaneous. He must paint on a thin stretched parchment with a special brush and black water paint in such a way that an unnatural or interrupted stroke will destroy the line or break through the parchment. Erasures or changes are impossible. These artists must practice a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere […]. This conviction that direct deed is the most meaningful reflection, I believe, has prompted the evolution of the extremely severe and unique discipline of the jazz or improvising musician.[13]

This aligns well with Sartre's observation and captures the intrinsic synthesis, within the art of jazz improvisation, of freedom of a kind that itself necessitates what Evans identifies as a unique discipline – one framed within, and in fact possible only within, a musical world of choice.

7 Sartre saw that a human self is not given; it is not the kind of thing that just happens. Nor is it like the teleological or developmental relation that Aristotle saw between the acorn and the oak tree; oak trees do not have sensibilities. And of course, they do not express themselves in language or in art. Selves, however, do, and Sartre's profound observation here is not reducible to the powerful point regarding the parallel that he made in point (5) just above. Here, he is further observing that the making of a self and the making of a work of art are reciprocally intertwined in such a way that one is often doing the one thing *in* doing the other. A sensibility, a way of being, is not an easy thing to describe (literature, rather than philosophy,

usually takes on this task), and it often takes some time to truly understand that sensibility's content and style. Words as spoken, as used, are not just of a common language carrying trans-contextual meaning (they are not general in the way a moral rule is often thought to be), they are *words of a person*.[14] Experience is not generic, not uniform across multiple cases; experience, rather, is the *experience of one person*.[15] That we know this is itself a confirmation of the importance of sensibility, or what we might call a perceptual or experiential style, and it is the kind of thing – not a given, not an acorn – that evolves over time, over the range of experience, and over reflection on and the interconnecting of that experience. We are, in this sense, all unique. And so it is as if jazz improvisation were created and developed in order to show this marvelous truth in the mirror of an artform. But as mentioned above, improvised music is not only a mirror; it is also, unto itself, a world of experience that goes to make the player. Just, indeed, as the player makes the experience.[16] Monk, like so many other great improvisers, made his body of work – but that body of work also made him. One can put the point linguistically: the meaning of the name "Thelonious Monk" was not given by pointing to a person on the street and saying, "That is the referent of this name." No one would suggest that – precisely because we know we are speaking of a person and, in this case, of an artist (which reconfirms the essential role of sensibility in knowing who and what a person is). There is no possibility of giving, or explaining, the meaning of that name without including the kinds of details in his music, in his improvisational style, considered above. It is a sensibility heard in his music – every passage of which both further augmented and solidified who he was. It is this, and nothing less involved and intricate, that is expressed in his music.[17]

8 And so, extending the previous observation to Sartre's final point: with (a) the making of art and the making of self inescapably being matters of dynamic creation and invention; and (b) where art and self are powerfully reciprocally interrelated, then (c) in navigating through an improvisatory world of moment-to-moment choice, players enact and express the vision of human freedom that lies at the core of existentialist thought.

We saw above (and here Nietzsche and Sartre come together) that volitional freedom can be exercised in improvised jazz in a way that constitutes authenticity-in-performance. It is with this freedom and this authenticity combined that – in a phrase drawn from Nietzsche but that also expresses Sartre's conception succinctly – players become who they are.

Notes

1 It is also of interest to consider what we often mean by the word "derivative" in music: it frequently means the audible, somewhat mechanical application of a fixed rule drawn from other work.

2 Thelonious Monk, *Genius of Modern Music, Vol. 1* (Blue Note CD).

3 In the booklet for the CD *The Definitive Thelonious Monk: Ken Burns Jazz* (Sony/Verve/Columbia, 2000).

4 Monk can't be imitated without "representative" problems. His work is distinctive to a degree that it cannot be imitated – but not why one might first think. It is not a matter of technical inimitability; many players learn to play in the style of Monk in the way they learn to imitate human voices or accents – but they can't be themselves in that style. Monk's style – the approach to melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic solution-finding, and the way of improvising through shifting harmonic terrain – is original to a Nietzschean degree. Like attempting to be a follower of Nietzsche, to be a follower of Monk's style would be self-refutingly oxymoronic. In this light one can consider Wynton Marsalis' album devoted to Monk's music (Wynton Marsalis, *Marsalis Plays Monk*, Sony: Columbia Records, 1999). It is a striking, beautiful, powerful performance – but it is not Monk. And its virtue is that it, knowingly, does not try to be. Rather, it is Monk material (and Monk-related material), filtered through the lens of Marsalis'

aesthetic sensibility, with his improvisational approach intact as he moves within creative spaces opened by Monk's musical mind. (And of course, in that respect, it then turns out to be more truly in the tradition of Monk than would be any attempt to replicate Monk.)

5 It is of interest to consider studio musicians in this connection: often like chameleons, always like actors, and usually extremely good at doing in music what Rich Little famously did with impersonated voices. One can easily imagine them saying that playing studio sessions is what they do, but it is not who they are. They may refer to records they made under their own names, or with ensembles where they, as we say, "had their hearts in it," or to private recordings that they wholly directed that were never publically or commercially released. The language we use is revealing, and producers and leaders for these sessions speak of who they are "using" on a given date. That language indicates that the purpose is to realize a product (consider the very term, "producer"), and so the player, however good, however independently accomplished, is, on that occasion, relegated to the role of Nietzschean representative, and in Sartrean terms (as we will see below) is not in a position to make the choices that make a self. This issue emerges in debates concerning Miles Davis' final few records: on them he layered in studio overdubs like commercial popular music recordings, playing some pop songs, not playing with players in a studio or live, hiring other arrangers and putting projects in the hands of producers who hired musicians he did not musically interact with – in short, turning himself into a pop-style studio musician. The reception of all this by players and aficionados was largely deeply negative – but negative in a way different from the criticism of Monk, or of Cecil Taylor, or of Ornette Coleman, all in their early days. Tellingly, it wasn't that these critical voices did not know enough, couldn't hear enough, and were not yet caught up. It is that they knew too much, and they recognized the sacrifice of both authenticity and the self's responsibility to its own long-developed and musically-enacted sensibility. One could see in those debates a structure reminiscent of Plato's *Euthyphro* (do the gods love it because it is good, or is it good because the gods love it?). Were those records good because Miles did them, or did Miles do them because they were good? The consensus was: surely not the former, and probably not the latter.

6 It will be clear by now that Sartre relentlessly uses the masculine pronoun, etc. I am referring throughout to "players," and my quotations of Sartre are intended as inclusive references to persons and musicians.

7 Thelonious Monk, *Genius of Modern Music, Vol. 2* (Blue Note CD).

8 *Thelonious Monk Trio* (Prestige Records, CD), recorded October 15 and December 18, 1952, and September 22, 1954; released 1954, with many reissues, repackages, and re-orderings of material in following decades.

9 Another strong example of Monk doing precisely this is his recording of the standard tune "Body and Soul" on his *Monk's Dream* (Columbia, 1962). In his booklet for the CD reissue, Peter Keepnews wrote of Monk's "highly personal readings of others' compositions, of which his radically reharmonized 'Body and Soul' is an excellent example." This is not, as one often finds, a subtle stamp of originality on a standard; in Monk's hands this becomes a transfiguring interpretation to a degree nearing an improvised re-composition.

10 I discuss the emergence of an ensemble's collective voice in Hagberg (2016) and Hagberg (2017).

11 For a compelling and illuminating example of this, see Bill Evans, *Conversations with Myself* (New York: Verve, 1963); Evans plays Monk's "Blue Monk" and "Round Midnight" on the recording (for which he used Glenn Gould's piano and which won Evans his first Grammy Award).

12 In an interview, the guitarist Pat Metheny reports that when he was starting out he was deeply struck (as have been so many young jazz guitarists) by Wes Montgomery's phenomenal improvisational work, and he sought to imitate it; it was not long until he realized the deeper truth here, which is that to truly follow Wes Montgomery would be to take on board what was relevant to him and then to develop fully his own voice. As has now been true for many years, both players are instantly recognizable within a few notes and, thus, both are, in this sense, life-affirming.

13 Bill Evans, Liner Notes, Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue* (New York: Columbia Records, 1959).

14 I explain this matter more fully in Hagberg (2015).

15 I discuss this in Hagberg (2020).

16 A memorable illustration of this relation is presented in M. C. Escher's *Drawing Hands* of 1948, in which two hands are simultaneously drawing each other into existence.

17 One might ask why I have focused exclusively on Thelonious Monk as the exemplar of this set of ideas concerning authenticity and the playing-into-selfhood nature of jazz improvisation. The answer is simple: while there are certainly many others from the beginning of this art form up to the present day who fit this mold, Monk is an extreme case, and extreme cases cast relevant features in the highest – and, thus, most visible – relief.

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16

MANYNESS IN MUSIC IMPROVISATION

Franziska Schroeder

1 Autobiographical Insights

In this chapter I explore the notion of multiplicities, of differing selves, in the practice of music improvisation. I do this by thinking through the fragmented and multiple personalities and identities of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa (1888–935). I thus hope to illuminate for the reader and improviser how, by extracting ideas and worldviews of one of Portugal's most mysterious, elusive and peculiar writers, I, as an improviser, find ways of stimulating my own musical improvisation practice.

For some time I have been drawn to Pessoa's multiplicities, his ways of thinking about life, moving the reader (or at least myself) between thoughts of self-loathing and self-exaltation, with words that seem, at times, manic-depressive, filled with buckets of self-pity, while, on the other hand, still being words that scratch the innermost parts of one's soul and allow one to look deeply into one's heart. Pessoa allows me to rethink approaches to music improvisation (and possibly to life itself). His thoughts entice me to think about the self and others; they inspire me to play and improvise, and indeed to re-play and re-improvise. Pessoa, once a completely unknown poet, was the incredible inventor of different lives and identities, and I will commence by providing a brief insight into his life, followed by an overview of some of the heteronyms (at times also referred to as alter-egos) that he created throughout his short life (he died at the age of forty-seven in 1935 in Lisbon).

One of my main inspirations comes from Pessoa's posthumously published book, *The Book of Disquiet (B.D.)* – first published in Portuguese in 1982, forty-seven years after his death and attributed to Bernardo Soares, one of Pessoa's semi-heteronyms.

I also extract ideas from Pessoa's *Philosophical Essays* (2012), while taking snippets and fragments of inspiration from other writers who have delved into his fascination with loneliness, the way sorrow colours our perception of the world, his plurality of thoughts and philosophies and his multiplicities and creation of different lives and fictional personas (his many heteronyms, semi-heteronyms and two pre-heteronyms).

The way I bring snippets of Pessoa to this chapter is indeed true to the fragmented and often disjointed nature of Pessoa's own thinking and writing.[1] *B.D.* was not meant to be read in an ordered or coherent fashion, from A–Z, but in a fragmented and random order. Notions of fragmentation and non-linear approaches to reading (and writing) texts are found in works by other thinkers, but I draw specific parallels to the work of French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari and the suggestion to read their masterpiece "A Thousand Plateaus" (1987). This book was, as Pessoa's, a work to be read in random order, and José Gil (2000) suggested that there exists an extraordinary

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convergence between the thinking of Pessoa and Deleuze, as they both envisaged abolishing ideas about metaphysical transcendence, and instead aimed to think and celebrate (through producing multiplicities) notions of immanence (Deleuze 2005: 25.).

In exploring Fernando Pessoa, specifically his ideas around multiplicities and multiple identities, I aim to bring to the discourse of music improvisation the work of a poet who, despite having been studied and scrutinised by scholars in other disciplines, has not seen much (if any) application in the study of music improvisation. I foresee many ways of linking ideas from Pessoa to the practice of music improvisation, and this chapter is solely an initial step into examining how some thoughts of Pessoa might inform and/or change the ways in which musicians improvise, how they might think about "self" and "other," or how they might improvise when in the company of others.

First, I commence by providing a short insight into the political context of Portugal at the time and a basic overview of Pessoa's life. This will introduce the reader to a man who is, it is often argued, "the greatest Portuguese poet of his century – indeed, probably the greatest since Luís de Camões" (the 16th-century author of "The Lusiads") (Kirsch 2017).

2 Pessoa's Writings – A Source of Inspiration for Improvisation Practices

2.1 Background

It is worth outlining a little of the political picture during the life of Fernando António Nogueira Pessoa (born on 13 June 1888 in Lisbon, Portugal), especially as he lived right in the middle of the First Portuguese Republic (*Primeira República Portuguesa*), the 16-year period between the end of the constitutional monarchy, marked by the 5 October 1910 republican revolution and the *coup d'état* of 28 May 1926.

Pessoa also lived through the Lisbon regicide of 1 February 1908, the murders of King Carlos I of Portugal and the Algarves, as well as his heir-apparent and eldest son, Luís Filipe, Prince Royal of Portugal. Pessoa was alive during the military dictatorship, known as *Ditadura Nacional* (National Dictatorship), which was followed by the *Estado Novo* (New State) regime of António de Oliveira Salazar, who led an authoritarian government that ruled Portugal until 1974. We know that Pessoa wrote critically of Salazar and fascism, calling out its illiberalism and censorship, and this stance led to him being silenced by the Salazar regime at the beginning of 1935, a few months before his death.[2]

Pessoa was born in Lisbon and spent his first seven years there. At the age of five his father, the music critic Joaquim de Seabra Pessoa, died of tuberculosis and six months later, Fernando's baby brother, Jorge, died at the age of one.

We know that his paternal grandmother suffered from bouts of insanity and was in and out of mental hospitals for the last twelve years of her life. It is often argued that Pessoa himself may have had Dissociative Identity Disorder (formerly known as Multiple Personality Disorder).[3] After Pessoa's father died, his mother, Maria Madalena Nogueira Pessoa, remarried and the family moved to South Africa, where his stepfather, João Miguel dos Santos Rosa, served as the Portuguese consul of Durban, a British-governed town. By the time the family moved to Durban, Pessoa could already read and write, and by 1895 (aged seven), he had already produced what is believed to be his first poem, in response to learning that the family would relocate to South Africa. The poem was called "To My Dear Mother":

> Here I am in Portugal,
> In the lands where I was born.
> However much I love them,
> I love you even more.

Pessoa attended a primary school run by Irish and French nuns and, thus, became fluent in French and English, languages in which he would go on to write many of his works. Pessoa returned to Lisbon in 1905 and remained there until his death in 1935.

In Portugal he became influenced by French symbolists, including Charles Baudelaire and Stéphane Mallarmé, as well as by the writings of other Portuguese poets, and later on by modernists such as W. B. Yeats, James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. In 1910 he founded the magazine *A Águia*, and in 1915 became part of the burgeoning Portuguese avant-garde, a Lisbon group of intellectuals[4] who founded the journal, *Orpheu* (Orfeo in Portuguese[5]), a journal that at first was mocked, but soon became highly influential, as it introduced modernist literature to Portugal and aimed to disquiet the Portuguese bourgeoisie and their social conventions. The journal was intended to be a tri-monthly publication, but only two issues were published in 1915, as the third ran into funding difficulties and publication ceased.[6]

On 29 November 1935, at the age of only forty-seven, Pessoa, who was a heavy smoker and drinker by then, suffered an attack of abdominal pains and a fever and was taken to hospital. The day before his death Pessoa wrote, in English: "I know not what tomorrow will bring." The next day he died from cirrhosis of the liver.[7]

I will now turn, with some more detail, to Pessoa's creation of multiple personas, his invention of heteronyms, sub-, and pre-heteronyms.

2.2 Multiplicities

Since his childhood, Pessoa had been creating fictitious characters, living in multiple words and through multiple, "unreal" others. Early on he was already casting doubt over whether these non-existing persons actually were real or whether, indeed, he may be the one who was not real. In a letter dated 13 January 1935, Pessoa confessed that he tended "to create around me a fictitious world, to surround myself with friends and acquaintances who never existed" (Pessoa 2012: xx). He continues to say that ever "since I have known myself to be the one I call ME, I can remember giving, in my mind, precise shapes, movements, characters and histories to various unreal figures," also stating that "I don't know of course, whether they really didn't exist, or whether I'm the one who doesn't exist" (Rickard 1971: 24).

Pessoa had not much regard for real life, preferring instead to fixate on dreaming and escaping into his other beings. Belonging, being, or, indeed, feeling did not mean much to him – he stated that real life was beside the point. "I've always belonged to what isn't where I am and to what I could never be," he said, and, "All I asked of life is that it go on by without my feeling it" (Ciuraru 2012). Although solitude devastated him, others' company oppressed him even more (Pessoa 2012: 48).

We know that Pessoa created over seventy personae, diverse writers with different writing styles and different identities,[8] and his own heteronym, Ricardo Reis, confirmed the multiplicities that Pessoa created. Reis states that we are made up of different lives and that "countless lives inhabit us" (Pessoa 2012: xviii), while another of his heteronyms, Álvaro de Campos, said: "I am more varied than a random crowd, I'm more diverse than the spontaneous universe" (Campos 2002: 244). It is worth noting that Pessoa referred to these different personae as "heteronyms," not "pseudonyms." According to Pessoa, "[T]he pseudonym's work is the work of the author in its own person, save the name he signs" (Pessoa 2012: xvii), whereas the heteronym's work is the work of the author outside its own person; a complete individuality made up by him. Pessoa insisted that "these individualities must be considered distinct from that of their author" (Rickard 1971: 27), and in a letter, he attempted to explain, from a psychological perspective, their source:

> […] the mental origin of my heteronyms lies in the constant and organic tendency I have towards depersonalization and make- believe. […] These phenomena, luckily for me and for

> others, have taken on a mental form in me; by that I mean that they do not show themselves in my practical outward life in contact with others; they explode inwardly, and I live them alone with myself.
>
> *(Rickard 1971: 24)*

This implies that Pessoa wanted to distance himself from these heteronyms, from these other writers he had created. He wanted nothing to do with them, except for bringing their work to public attention. The following quote from his selected prose reaffirms this distancing:

> You should approach these books as if you hadn't read this explanation but had simply read the books, buying them one by one at a bookstore, where you saw them on display. You shouldn't read them in any other spirit. […] That doesn't mean you have the right to believe in my explanation. As soon as you read it, you should suppose that I've lied – that you're going to read books by different poets, or different writers, and that through those books you'll receive emotions and learn lessons from those writers, with whom I have nothing to do except as their publisher.
>
> *(Pessoa 2001: 4–5)*

Pessoa created two well-known *pre-heteronyms* – independent literary personalities Charles Robert Anon and Alexander Search. His three main *heteronyms* were created in 1928: *Alberto Caeiro, Ricardo Reis* and *Álvaro de Campos*. These heteronyms possessed distinct biographies, temperaments, philosophies, appearances, writing styles and even signatures.

In a letter of 13 January 1935 to the literary critic and friend, Adolfo Casais Monteiro, Fernando Pessoa wrote that he had given a voice to his main heteronyms while writing on a chest of drawers. In that same letter, he mentions what he describes as his "triumphal day,"[9] 8 March 1914,[10] during which he found himself

> standing before a tall chest of drawers, took up a piece of paper, began to write, remaining upright all the while since I always stand when I can. I wrote thirty some poems in a row, all in a kind of ecstasy, the nature of which I shall never fathom. It was the triumphant day of my life, and I shall never have another like it. I began with a title, The Keeper of Sheep. And what followed was the appearance of someone within me to whom I promptly assigned the name of Alberto Caeiro. Please excuse the absurdity of what I am about to say, but there had appeared within me, then and there, my own master. It was my immediate sensation. So much so that, with those thirty odd poems written, I immediately took up another sheet of paper and wrote as well, in a row, the six poems that make up "Oblique Rain" by Fernando Pessoa.
>
> *(Monteiro 2016: 301)*

Caeiro, the first of Pessoa's major heteronyms, was "born" in 1889 and died in 1915. He was apparently an only child as his parents had died when he was young, and he was subsequently raised by an aunt. Caeiro had no profession and not much of an education; he was a pale person of medium height with blue eyes who, at the age of only twenty-six, died of tuberculosis. Caeiro wrote, often entirely in free verse, around ninety poems, forty-nine of which form part of the "Keeper of Sheep." Once Caeiro said in an "interview" of his unassuming accomplishments: "I don't pretend to be anything more than the greatest poet in the world" (Ciuraru 2012). Other heteronyms admired Caeiro as their "master," whose style of writing, using plainspoken poetry, showed almost Zen-like wisdom (Kirsch 2017), such as:

> I thank God I'm not good
> But have the natural egoism of flowers
> And rivers that follow their path

Unwittingly preoccupied
With only their flowering and their flowing.

Another of Pessoa's heteronyms was Ricardo Reis, born in Oporto in 1887. A classicist and physician with dark, short, strong and wiry hair, educated by Jesuits, he spoke Latin and Greek and lived in exile in Brazil after 1911. Reis was a regular writer but with minimal outputs. According to Kirsch (2017), Reis sounds like Horace or Catullus, dwelling on the fleetingness of life and love in disciplined stanzas such as:

As if each kiss
Were a kiss of farewell,
Let us lovingly kiss, my Chloe.

Pessoa explained that Reis was "a Latinist by virtue of school training and a semi-Hellenist by virtue of his own efforts" (Ciuraru 2012).

And finally, the third main heteronym I will detail is Álvaro de Campos. Born in Tavira, Campos was a bisexual, unemployed naval engineer, who was slender, with a slight tendency to stoop, hair smooth and often parted on the side, monocled. Campos lived in Lisbon, having previously studied in Glasgow. Pessoa provided a great number of details about his life, not only the exact time of Campos' birth (1:30 pm on 15 October 1890), but he also noted his exact height at 1.75 meters, which, according to Pessoa was two centimetres taller than himself, and Ciuraru argues that, in Campos, Pessoa invested "all the emotion that I allow neither in myself nor in my living" (Ciuraru 2012).

In terms of his writing, Campos was a futurist, who celebrated the power and the speed of the modern (Kirsch 2017) with poetry such as:

Pantheistic rage of awesomely feeling
With all my senses fizzing and all my pores fuming
That everything is but one speed, one energy, one divine line
From and to itself, arrested and murmuring furies of mad speed.

We also find works written by *semi-heteronyms*,[11] such as "The Education of the Stoic" by Baron of Teive and the autobiographical "Book of Disquiet"[12] by Bernardo Soares, an author whom Pessoa described as having his own voice and who, as an assistant bookkeeper, lived in downtown Lisbon, just as Pessoa himself did. It is argued that Soares could be seen as a mutilated version of Pessoa. He was certainly the closest to Pessoa's own voice, experience and sensibility, and, thus, the closest of the identities to a pseudonym. Pessoa admitted in his later life that "his [Soares'] personality, although not my own, doesn't differ from my own but is a mere mutilation of it" (Zenith in Pessoa 2002: xi). And then there is C. Pacheco, an experimental surrealist poet, who had written only a few poems and who was a student of Caeiro's (in Mahr 1998).

When Pessoa writes under his own name, his verse is brief, metaphysical if not sentimental:

I contemplate the silent pond
Whose water is stirred by a breeze.
Am I thinking about everything,
Or has everything forgotten me?

The striking similarities between Campos and Pessoa have been well researched (De Castro 2006), and Campos is indeed the only heteronym that evolves throughout Pessoa's writings and the one who accompanies Pessoa until his own death, while all his other creations were either killed off (Caeiro), were sent into exile (Reis disappeared to Brazil without returning), or committed suicide (Baron Teive). It might be read as a slight comfort to a man whose life was full of fictitious stories, multiple characters and twisted lies, that Campos served as a close friend and companion to Pessoa, and – although he interfered with Pessoa's only love affair[13] – they were also inseparable.

With de Campos, Pessoa was able to release his feelings and desires, be more courageous as well as more controversial, as Mariana De Castro has argued (2006: 240 f.).

2.3 Pessoa – A Stranger to Himself

Bearing in mind Pessoa's ability to create multiple identities, to write and indeed become other, it might be argued that Pessoa himself was never really who he was or pretended to be; he was not only a stranger to his family,[14] but also a "stranger to himself."[15] Jorge de Sena referred to him as a "Man Who Never Was" (in Monteiro 1982).

He was a poet who easily dissolved into thin air, a phantom man portrayed by Paz (2010: 14) as follows:

> Anglomaniac, myopic, courteous, evasive, dressed in dark clothes, reticent and familiar, cosmopolitan who preached nationalism, *solemn investigator of useless things*, never-smiling humorist who chills our blood, inventor of other poets and destroyer of himself, author of paradoxes clear as water and, as water, dizzying: *to fake is to know oneself*, a mysterious man who makes no effort to cultivate mystery, mysterious as the mid-day moon, taciturn phantom of the Portuguese mid-day: Who is Pessoa?

It might be odd that Pessoa invented others, while often destroying himself, but, according to what Paz outlined in his beautiful essays "El desconocido de sí mismo," poets are plural beings, they live in dialogue with the strangers inside them, with strangers that inhabit them. He continues to say that a poet's biography is not found through the events in his life, but through his poems; thus, a poet's work is his biography:

> We write to be what we are or to be what we are not. In either case we search for ourselves. And if we are lucky enough to find ourselves – a signal of creation – we will discover that we are, in fact, strangers to ourselves.
>
> *(Paz 2010: 22)*

In the *Book of Disquiet* — a book that, like Pessoa himself, was unfinished, unfinishable, with not much of a plot, a collection of fragmentary writings, presenting multiple perspectives, a plurality of thoughts and philosophies – we further read about Pessoa's self-deconstruction or self-negation, about his strangeness, his boredom, regret, despair and loneliness. We find, as Zenith argues, "a micro-chaos within the larger chaos of Pessoa's written universe" (2002: xvi), a "treasure chest of both polished and uncut gems, which can be arranged and rearranged in infinite combinations" (due to the lack of a pre-established order) (2002: xvi). Zenith has called the *B.D.* a "non-book," a "book waiting to happen," a "negation," a "subversion of a book," a piece of anti-literature, "a kind of primitive, verbal CAT scan of one man's anguished soul" (2002: ix). It has been said that no other book is as honest as the *B.D.*, and that through the work Pessoa, in his mastery of becoming, "pretending" or "faking" being other/another, was really true and honest to himself.

Pessoa was a master of self-negation, stating that he wanted to say nothing as he had nothing to say (2002: 21). He repeatedly talked of his unworthiness as perceived by himself, which we find expressed in the first four lines in one of his better-known poems, "Tabacaria" (Álvaro de Campos 1928).

> Não sou nada.
> Nunca serei nada.
> Não posso querer ser nada.
> À parte isso, tenho em mim todos os sonhos do mundo.

> I am nothing.
> I shall always be nothing.
> I can only want to be nothing.
> Apart from this, I have in me all the dreams in the world.
>
> (Trans. Heyrman 1995)

Such a notion of being insignificant, of being strange and a poet of little impact is echoed in the words of Pizarro who describes Pessoa as:

> not having met anyone important throughout his life, failing "to secure a position as a librarian in Cascais, [founding] journals that were ephemeral, who didn't get married and barely had any love interests, who didn't teach classes and wrote critically of the University of Lisbon's professors, won only one award and then of the second order (for *Mensagem*, 1934), was censored by the Salazar dictatorship for insulting the Portuguese dictator – under the pretext that he was defending secret societies – who joked about the Nobel Prize and the possibility of a set of *Obras completas*, and who gathered in just two trunks almost every piece of writing he left for posterity.
>
> *(Pizarro 2019: 82)*

Indeed, Pessoa presented himself as "the least there ever was" amongst his heteronyms, pondering how his life might be idyllic if it were lived by another person. He insisted that the others, the personae he created, were not him; they were not just another part of his own personality, but, rather, were separate from him. He said:

> To create, I've destroyed myself. I've so externalized myself on the inside that I don't exist there except externally. I'm the empty stage where various actors act out various plays.
>
> *(Pessoa 2002: 259)*

Such feelings of emptiness, of unworthiness, permeate much of Pessoa's writings, and it is reasonable to wonder how such writings and thoughts of a seemingly unworthy, paradoxical, mysterious, evasive and never-smiling, self-pitying humourist could ever be of meaning or inspiration to a musician, an improviser, like myself.

3 Applying Some of Pessoa's Ideas in Music Improvisation

3.1 Music Improvisation

In the following section I take some of Pessoa's concepts, including "externalizing yourself/offering yourself"; the idea of "beginning and endings"; and the notion of "becoming other." These concepts are amongst many that have given me food for thought and for making music. I delve into these a little, taking the viewpoint of an improvising musician. I could have selected a larger variety of Pessoa's ideas, as his fragmentary notes, philosophical thoughts and poetry are vast and inspiring on many levels. However, I decided to take just some of the ideas that stood out at the time of writing this chapter, as those ideas inspired me particularly strongly when thinking about the practice of music improvisation.

3.2 Externalising Yourself

For example, take the notion of self-sacrifice, of externalising oneself, of handing oneself over, becoming "the empty stage" for others to act out their play (as Pessoa said). This, for an improviser,

is an intriguing concept and before I elaborate further, I want to emphasise that the type of music improvisation I refer to has the ethos of shared and relational practice; the practice of what one may refer to as "free improvisation". It is a type of improvisation that is free from any predetermined material; a music practice that asks the improvisers to be open for an encounter with another –another person, another culture, another's experiences – or with other materials, but also with something "other" than oneself.

Such an improvisation is emergent and often considered to be inclusive,[16] a practice that enables musicians not only to explore their instruments in unusual ways, but allows for modes of social organisation, challenging the hierarchical structures of traditional Western music and structures of political systems, as Evan Parker argued (in Schroeder and Ó hAodha 2014: 1–7). I think of such improvising as a collective, co-created activity and a social undertaking, where musicians engage with each other based on equality and trust, and where a space for differences is created, allowing for a diversity of voices and meanings, while questioning exclusionary identities and assumptions.

Being a "stage" (as per Pessoa) on which others act out their lives is an exciting proposal, which lets me, as an improviser, think less of my "self," of my identity, contributing to an externally occurring musical encounter, but it asks me to see myself in a non-self-centred way, more as an offering, a stage onto which others can step, on which others might flourish, on which they might encounter things they would not encounter otherwise; being that person who, as Pessoa said, "breaks her soul into pieces," enabling others to pick up pieces, to assemble them in ways they see fit. Being that stage, that offering, for others to thrive on.

I believe it is a generous idea to consider such an approach in improvising with others. Pessoa's stage metaphor suggests that we resist an emphasis on the intersubjective, possibly even resisting the often-glorified notion that is prevalent in improvisation practices of "dialogics," where improvisation is seen as an egalitarian, open, dynamic and processual interaction between humans. Pessoa's stage metaphor urges the improviser to move away from a solipsistic interpretation of being in such dialogic exchange towards an offering – offering something of yourself to another – to be that stage, as Pessoa thought of himself, for others to step onto.

But if we do take this idea to an extreme, then art is seen not as expressing the self, but as meaningfully reconfiguring it. Pessoa was a master of reconfiguring the self or, even more so, he was a master of obscuring the self, creating different, many other selves, a profusion of selves. Can we think of improvisation as an act of offering; as a "stage" on which others may act out their lives; a stage on which the self approaches itself (or its or others' multiple selves)?

And going further: can we think of improvisation as multiple selves not necessarily expressing "themselves," but meaningfully *reconfiguring* themselves?

I ask myself what sort of music might emerge when improvising in such non-self-centred way, with no idea of myself (not even a non-idea of myself), allowing myself to be a nomad wandering through and inside my musical body, finding elements and sonic expressions without desiring anything from the universe beyond my own imagination, having everything already somewhere inside…

If, as musicians, we want and are willing to try this, to feel other, to think other, to multiply our self (ourselves), we only need to look at Pessoa and his profusion of selves.[17] Pessoa said: "I've no idea of myself, not even one that consists of a nonidea of myself. I am a nomadic wanderer through my consciousness" (Ciuraru 2012).

Pessoa's way of almost turning himself not into another person, but into aspects of the other, of becoming a word, a paragraph or a punctuation mark, is exciting to me as an improviser. It allows me to offer myself as a "stage," for others to step onto and to reflect, but also to question the self (myself, many selves), digging deep into a possible meaning of a Pessoan "nonidea of self." Looking back at yourself, multiplying yourself, feeling away from yourself, feeling other.

Pessoa speaks about this as almost alienating from "self":

> "Unceasingly I feel that I was another, that I felt other, that I thought other."[…]
>
> "I am a spectator of myself… I created myself, crevasse and echo, by thinking. I multiplied myself, by introspection […] I am other even in my way of being."
>
> "I am, in large measure, the self same prose I write," he confesses. "I unroll myself in periods and paragraphs, I make myself punctuation marks…I've made myself into the character of a book, a life one reads."
>
> *(Ciuraru 2012)*

Being an improviser, creating yourself through others, then critiquing and denying yourself through others; becoming a sound, a phrase, not asking what we as human-to human improvisers aim to play or achieve, but opening up to becoming more like the "stage," the walls that surround us that listen to us play, and asking the question: what does the "other" (not limited to a human being)[18] want. Being the self or yourself, playing your "self, " questioning that same idea, unrolling yourself into textures, sounds, making yourself a phrase, an articulation, becoming music, becoming improvisation, an improvisation that floats, disperses, pulsates, scatters itself and oneself, becoming and becoming multiple, being an improvisation for others to use, to develop but also to question, existing while being non-existent, being a person, being Pessoa (Pessoa – indeed translates as "person") and a non-person, being a body and nobody, as Pessoa reflects:

> I am the suburb of a non-existent town, the prolix commentary on a book never written. I am nobody, nobody. I am a character in a novel which remains to be written, and I float, aerial, scattered without ever having been, among the dreams of a creature who did not know how to finish me off.
>
> *(Pessoa 2002)*

3.3 Beginnings and Endings

Another concept I take from Pessoa is that of beginnings and endings, and Pessoa's scorn for definite, finished things, as this statement clarifies:

> My character of mind is such that I hate beginnings and the ends of things, for they are definite points.
>
> *(2012: xvi)*

For improvisers the question of "beginning and ending," of how or where to start and how or where to end is one that is often pondered. It may be rather peculiar and difficult to think of a musical improvisation – and indeed any musical work – that does not start or finish. One could possibly imagine a musical improvisation that never ends (or that ends only with the cessation of life), but how can we possibly imagine something that does not commence?

Pessoa evidently had to commence, despite his perfectionist instinct, which should have prohibited him from starting all together. And he did start; indeed, he started many ideas, notes and texts, and even if they were not complete, they had to finish at some stage. Pessoa did have an urge to end, he wanted to finish, to cease, to be the "ebb and flow of a vast sea, […] to be unknown and external," specifically he wanted "to cease, to end at last, but surviving as something else: the page of a book, a tuft of dishevelled hair, […] the last smoke to rise from the village going to sleep" (Pessoa 2012: 34).

He wanted to complete something, even in its most dismal form (he likens a poorly finished work to the miserable plant in the lone flowerpot of his crippled neighbour) (Pessoa 2012: 23).

In the *B.D.* Pessoa occasionally speaks about the possible fulfilment of completing, of finishing something, stating that work we put off is bad, but work we never do is worse, and that work that is finished is at least finished, and even if it's poor, at least it exists. Pessoa seemed surprised, and at the same time troubled, when he eventually did manage to finish something, stating:

> I'm astounded whenever I finish something. Astounded and distressed. My perfectionist instinct should inhibit me from finishing; it should inhibit me from even beginning. But I get distracted and start doing something. What I achieve is not the product of an act of my will but of my will's surrender. I begin because I don't have the strength to think; I finish because I don't have the courage to quit. This book is my cowardice.
>
> *(Pessoa 2012: 139)*

I am inspired by the thought of simply commencing a musical idea by pure nature of being distracted, of making sounds because of not being able to think and, thus, letting things start, almost as if by themselves, not by an act of one's will, of *wanting* to make music, but by one's will surrendering itself to the music happening. I wonder: what might finishing an improvisation (but what is a finished improvisation anyway?) because one cannot quit sound or feel like?

Maybe the fact that we start and finish any improvisation is the cowardice of us as musicians?

Improvisers do revel – not in end products or starting points, as such, but, rather, they often rejoice in being on the journey itself. The artist enjoys being in the process, in the moment of making, crafting, inventing, but how to be in the present while being yourself completely and unconditionally? Being in the present was also not a great concern of Pessoa; rather, being himself (in whatever form or state) was a desirable idea (even if only for a short moment when writing/thinking):

> To heed the present moment isn't a great or lasting concern of mine. I crave time in all its duration, and I want to be myself unconditionally.
>
> *(Pessoa 2012: 23)*

Pessoa saw himself as a process; he was always becoming, not only being in the process, but being more than process, being utterances and words, being gestures, being fleeting moments or dreamt illusions.

> I'm a well of gestures that even in my mind have not all been traced, of words I haven't even thought to form on my lips, of dreams I forgot to dream to the end.
>
> I'm the ruins of buildings that were never more than ruins, whose builder, halfway through, got tired of thinking about what he was building.
>
> *(Pessoa 2012: 62)*

Pessoa inspires me to think of a music where I improvise with little things, with fragments, with broken and disconnected pieces, an ongoing perpetual fragmentation, instead of a whole or connected elements that might form a whole. As an improviser, I may want to seek this forever tentative, indefinite music, these sounds that are always in transition – sounds that compose themselves as if on their own accords, sounds that transit, pass and float. Sounds that sound themselves in the same way that Pessoa's words came into being through ideas that he never had, or ideas he tried to avoid:

> I avoid ideas. I forget the right words and phrases, and they flash before me in the physical act of writing, as if my pen itself produced them.
>
> *(Pessoa 2012: 27)*

3.4 Otherness – Becoming Other

The other idea I extract from Pessoa is that of "otherness," of "becoming other." It is astounding that a man as fluid and diverse as Pessoa, a creator of multiple identities, a master of becoming other and of embracing a plurality of worldviews, religions, ethics, sexualities and political beliefs (demonstrated through his heteronym Álvaro de Campos, as Dix argued: 2010: 85), was only able to become other males. One thing he was not able to, nor possibly wanted to, is to become female, woman, girl, mother, girlfriend, wife. It has been argued that, especially through the voice of de Campos, Pessoa (although rejecting a binary male/female construct), often tends to displace and subjugate women into passive receivers of male sexual fantasies (see Bishop-Sanchez 2007: 201 ff.).

There is one exception amongst his three heteronyms that appeared in 1914 – the female character Maria José, who, however, was portrayed as a helplessly love-sick hunchback. Maria José was possibly more of a representation of Pessoa himself, i.e., more of a pseudonym than a heteronym, and it is conceivable to think that Pessoa simply had not enough experiences,[19] feelings or emotions to draw from to become anything other than a pathetic, helplessly lovesick hunchback (see also Klobucka and Sabine 2007).

It suffices to say that we know – through critical examinations of his texts, letters and his own biographical amendments – that Pessoa had homosexual, if not pederast, tendencies and his repressed homoerotic feelings (Simões 1950: 518) were expressed in some of his works, including in the famous "Naval Ode" (signed by Álvaro de Campos) and in his early poems "Antinous" and "Epithalamium." Although Pessoa claimed sexuality was largely irrelevant to him, he had shown a keen fascination with the sexual activities of writers he considered to be homosexuals, including Walt Whitman, William Shakespeare and Oscar Wilde (De Castro 2006: 242). Pessoa's heteronym Álvaro de Campos clearly acknowledges his homoerotic desires for Whitman (De Castro 2006),[20] and sex, in various manifestations, is a recurrent leitmotif in his works.

This is not to say that Pessoa himself had no carnal desires, but he was well aware of his critics' ability to read his works with a Freudian psychoanalytical eye, which may have led them to discover more of Pessoa's sexuality, his homosexual inclinations, and pederast fantasies. As De Castro argued, Pessoa was acutely aware of anybody discovering "something untoward and reduce artistic outpourings to sublimations of libido" (2006: 233). Pessoa even went so far as to distance himself later in life from his earlier homoerotic writings so as to leave a more complimentary legacy to the outside world. He was a man of privacy and someone who was keen not to be subjected to intrusive psychoanalytical interpretations through his works.

In one sense, then, Pessoa portrays himself as unable (unwilling) to feel, stating that one "of my life great tragedies – but one of those surreptitious tragedies that take place in the shadows – is my inability to feel anything naturally" (Pessoa 2012: 360). Words signified more to him than human emotions, an adjective mattered more than the "real weeping of a human soul" (Pessoa 2012: 32). He preferred life to happen without having to indulge in feeling, without the necessity of desiring in the flesh, but living, instead, in the privacy of his fantasies. Pessoa states: "All I asked of life is that it go on by without my feeling it" (Ciuraru 2012).

Pessoa's writing is full of pain, something I deeply felt while reading the *B.D.* Not just living, being in and enduring the world, but his own ideas and thoughts were also painful to him. His philosophical thoughts were integral and so much a part of him that even if they pained him, even if they didn't agree with or please him, he couldn't reject them. Pessoa could not liberate himself from his own thoughts, since they deeply constitute himself. He compares his situation to that of the Persian poet Omar Khayyám, who, Pessoa argues, is lucky as he is able to reject philosophies since he lives in a world external to him. Omar's philosophies are not the same as himself, which means he has this external world from which he can separate himself, whereas Pessoa thought of himself very much as chained to himself, as if the external world did not exist for him. Pessoa is

inside and outside; he is himself and, at the same time, he is not. His ideas are diverse; they are his and they are not his; but he cannot detach himself from the ideas that he might need to or want to criticise; and, as he said, "without my consent, I have in me, as if they were souls, the philosophies I criticize […] I can't reject them because they are myself."

He admitted that even if he is a different personality, his philosophical ideas hold him in some place. Pessoa as a captive to his own thoughts!?

But Pessoa wanted to feel,[21] he wanted to want, and wanted to desire, and he speaks of this strange absurdity as follows:

> If I think, everything seems absurd to me; if I feel, everything seems strange; if I want, it's something in me that does the wanting. Whenever there's action in me, I'm sure I wasn't responsible for it. If I dream, it seems I'm being written. If I feel, it seems I'm being painted. If I want, it seems that I've been placed in a vehicle, like freight to be delivered, and that I continue with a movement I imagine is my own towards a destination I don't want until I get there.
>
> *(Pessoa 2012: 249 f.)*

Despite feeling strange and absurd for wanting to want, for wanting to feel, Pessoa had a profound sense of seeing the absolute bare, simple essence, of seeing pleasure in things, of seeing things as beautiful. Beauty, indeed, to him was a name "we give to things in exchange for the pleasure they give" (2018: 8). And although Pessoa states that beauty signifies nothing, he does ponder why we say that things are beautiful.

There exists, at times, in improvisation, this type of simple beauty, when the music flows, when improvisers can accept an existence within fragile ways of being in each other's company, where one doesn't know who is affecting and who is being affected, who is giving and who or what is being given back. At such time, we may notice an organic system of exchange that shows us the simplicity of "becoming other," of allowing, receiving and accepting otherness. An improvisation that can simply exist (and this is not an easy state to achieve); an improvisation that can show you to be oneself, that offers one the ability to see only what is there to see, to hear only what is there to hear; a music that allows one to simply be – this is what Pessoa encourages me to reflect upon, akin to the way in which he contemplated simply being oneself and seeing what exists to see: "How difficult to be just oneself and not see anything but the visible!" (2018: 8).

4 Final Lament

Reading Pessoa has made me deeply sorrowful, while, at other times, it has shown me incredible insights into how to think differently about life and others.

I would not be surprised if the reader wonders how a poet, who lets "humanity stumble, grope and shove its way up staircases," who contemplates, for no reason, a world with no purpose, and who is so utterly lonely, desolately dark, but also so very self-obsessed (giving the last beggar the ultimate alms of his desolation, not wondering whether the beggar, someone surely in need of life's basics, would even want to accept his desolate leftovers), can be of any inspiration for a musician.

However, by the ways in which he is able to touch me so deeply, to remind me of the essence of one's body (even in his denial and negation of bodily love and feelings!), Pessoa tells me that music is bodily; it is sounding our flesh, sounding with and through the body, vibrating our bodies in order to resonate with other bodies. And in improvising, being open to an idea of "becoming other" (not necessarily becoming male or female – a binary view that does not align with Pessoa – but contemplating the possibility of otherness) is and must always be an essential way of being, of making music.

About the *Book of Disquiet* Pessoa said: "And this book is a lament. Once written, it will […] be the saddest book in Portugal" (Pessoa 2012: 346).

This chapter is not a lament. It is a musical celebration of one of Portugal's most curious and inspiring poets and thinkers. It is my way of rethinking how I improvise, how I think of myself in the company of others; how I think of others; how I think about what music might become; how I think of "I" as a manifestation of the many others inside me, the pluralities and multiplicities that affect my music making and my own person; and ultimately this chapter is a celebration of the diversity of voices that we are so fortunate to encounter in improvising with others, in being in the company of "manyness in music improvisation."

Notes

1 *The Book of Disquiet* consists of fragments of Pessoa's life and was left unedited by him; he called it a "factless autobiography."
2 Pessoa is known to have aligned himself against communism, socialism, fascism and Catholicism (Serrão 1980: 51; Barreto 2008).
3 Dissociation is a phenomenon that illustrates the complexities and discontinuities in the experience of the self.

> The American Psychiatric Association defines dissociation as a disruption in the usually integrated functions of consciousness, memory, identity, and perception of the environment. Dissociative phenomena are central to the dissociative disorders, such as psychogenic fugue, multiple personality, and depersonalization disorder, and to the somatoform disorders, like conversion disorder.
>
> (Mahr 1998: 25)

4 Amongst the contributors were the writer Mário de Sá-Carneiro and the writer, visual artist and choreographer Almada Negreiros, as well as the painters Amadeo de Souza-Cardoso and Guilherme de Santa-Rita.
5 The name "Orpheus" was not a coincidence. In Greek mythology, Orpheus, who, in order to save his wife Eurydice from Hades, had been asked to walk in front of her, out of the underworld, and not look back until they both had reached the upper world. In a similar vein, the Portuguese Orpheu generation was intent on relinquishing the past and focusing their attention forward, on the future of the country – a modern Portugal of the 20th century.
6 The third issue had already been in the printing process and was lost for several years. It was finally rediscovered and published in 1984.
7 After Pessoa's death, nearly 30,000 manuscript pages were discovered in the flat he rented in Lisbon. During his lifetime, Pessoa published four books in English and one in Portuguese, entitled "Mensagem" (Message).
8 A list of Pessoa's seventy-two heteronyms and semi-heteronyms is provided in (Lopes (1990: 67 ff.).
9 For a long time, Pessoa's "triumphant day" was taken as a real event; however, it has been shown that even this event was another of his fictitious creations.
10 I have not found any literary reference to the importance of this day being International Women's Day, but the fact that in 1914, IWD was held in Germany, where a poster by Karl Maria Stadler (http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=1651) that called for a public gathering of women on March 8, 1914, was banned in the German Empire, seems an interesting coincidence to Pessoa's choice for his "triumphal day." Despite the many arguments that Pessoa often displaces women (especially through the voice of his heteronym Álvaro de Campos), he may, after all, have given us a secret hint as to his support/admiration for women.
11 It is important to note that the heteronym differs from the author in thinking, feeling *and* style of writing, whereas the semi-heteronym differs only in thinking and feeling but not in the style of his writing.
12 During the first phase of the book (1913 to 1920), the work was attributed to Vicente Guedes, described as "a man in his thirties, thin, fairly tall, very hunched when sitting though less so when standing, and dressed with an not entirely unself-conscious negligence" (Kirsch 2017). When Pessoa returned to the book in 1929, he had re-imagined the author and the work became that of Bernardo Soares.
13 At the age of thirty-one Pessoa had an affair with a nineteen-year old woman, named Ofélia de Queiroz. One day, Pessoa asked Campos to inform Ofélia that his mental illness was keeping him from seeing her.

14 In 1958 when, according to Pizarro, Pessoa's work started to "trickle" into Latin America, the poet, writer, and diplomat Octavio Paz tried to persuade Pessoa's brother-in-law, Francisco Caetano Dias, to access Pessoa's work as he was preparing an anthology of Pessoa's poetry (see Paz 2004 and 2010), but Pessoa's family was ashamed of that "strange relative" – a poet who kept hidden, "under the humble appearance of a sporadic translator of foreign correspondences for commercial houses" (Pizarro 2019: 79).

15 The phrase is taken from Octavio Paz who, between 1960 and 1961, had prepared an anthology of Pessoa's poetry (see Paz 2004 and 2010), opening it with the now classic essay "A Stranger to himself."

16 I have elsewhere talked about music improvisation as an *inclusive practice* (Samuels and Schroeder 2019), as a practice that can generate empathic exchanges amongst a community of people, while forming new musical group identities.

17 Pessoa would often agree with some theories from his heteronyms, and then disagree with others; though it is said that his heteronyms coexisted peacefully, even if some of them criticised Pessoa's work and one of them, Campos, even claimed that Pessoa did not exist!

18 Marcel Cobussen in his 2017 book gives credit to other *actants* in improvisation. He says that improvisation is *"a complex event in which many actants, many actors, factors, and vectors, both human and non-human, converge and interact"* (2017: 13 f.).

19 Some slightly noteworthy female perspectives that he offered might be found in the unpublished English poem "Prayer to a Woman's Body" as well as the instructions on how to cheat one's husband (as detailed in "Advice to Unhappily Married Women").

20 De Castro (2006) intelligently shows the many close links between Oscar Wilde and his fictionalisation of his own persona, and that of Fernando Pessoa and his fictional creations, with the major difference being that Wilde channelled his genius into life, whereas Pessoa invested his talents into his literary creations. De Castro further clarifies both the authors' art of "bending or inventing reality," and Pessoa's assimilation of Wilde's theoretical ideas (as outlined in his essay "The Decay Of Lying") in order to create his own fictitious characters.

21 Pessoa endowed his heteronym Caeiro with the power for feeling, expressed in Caeiro's "philosophy of sensations," where sensationism meant feeling things; however, "not as a single person, but rather as a sum of people" (Dix 2010: 88).

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17

FORMS OF IMPROVISATION AND EXPERIMENTALISM

Daniele Goldoni

As I write this text, a pandemic is raging in Italy, where I live, and across the world, killing people and suspending close relationships. This text is about improvisation as a means and way of inhabiting, which now has also been interrupted at my university student workshop in Venice, owing to the emergency. The following humble considerations aim to encourage the hope of living better together.

1 Is Improvisation "The Most Widely Practiced and Least Acknowledged and Understood of All Musical Activities"?

In 1980 Derek Bailey wrote (Bailey 1993: ix):

> Improvisation enjoys the curious distinction of being both the most widely practised of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood. While it is today present in almost every area of music, there is an almost total absence of information about it.

Since then, something has changed. Nettl's complaint that "improvisation" is an art "neglected in scholarship" (Nettl 1998) does not reflect the growing interest in – and literature on – the subject. A large amount of improvisation recordings and transcriptions are now available. Improvisation methods are taught in conservatories, in music schools and online. A rich and articulated critical literature occupies an important place in musicology, while studies on improvisation extend to dance, theater and other arts, as well as beyond the domain of art, to philosophy, psychology, computational psychology, sociology, architecture and urban planning, environmental studies, management and economics, within a horizon of global changes and emergencies that seem to challenge predictability (see, among an abundant body of literature, Hagberg 2000; Lewis and Piekut 2016a, 2016b; Bertinetto 2018). But despite the apparent increase in information about improvisation, and in its public recognition, I would question the current understanding of this practice. Even Bailey's claim that "improvisation" is "the most widely practised of all musical activities […] today present in almost every area of music" is far from clear. The word does not always refer to the same thing.

2 A Negative Concept

In his influential and in many ways beautiful text, Derek Bailey prescribed "non-idiomatic" practices but refused to give a definition of improvisation. The reason is clear: a "non-idiomatic" practice cannot be positively defined, either in words or by musical rules based on recorded or

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transcribed models. It can only be presented through practical and singular "fleeting" examples (Bailey 1993: x, 142). But this renunciation did not mean, for Bailey, giving up on knowing something essential. Improvisers should be aware that idiomatic improvisation – such as jazz, flamenco or baroque – and non-idiomatic improvisation have different "concerns" (Bailey 1993: xii, 18). Non-idiomatic improvisers choose to play with other "free" improvisers who share the same awareness (Bailey 1993: 95, 105, 112). Finally, the description of "non-idiomatic" improvisation recognizes it as a *higher critical* awareness, insofar as

> much of the impetus of free improvisation came from the questioning […] of the "rules" governing musical language. Firstly from the effect this had in jazz […] and secondly from the results of much earlier developments in musical language in European straight music.
>
> *(Bailey 1993: 84)*

The higher awareness of the non-idiomatic approach ended up placing non-idiomatic improvisation (in jazz, rock, flamenco, and probably many kinds of "ethnic" music) on a level not only different, but also lower. However, the negative concept of "non-idiomatic" has proven inadequate to circumscribe the boundaries of "free" improvisation. The belief that free improvisers will recognize other free improvisers in musical practice has often been contradicted by misunderstandings and disagreements, project failures and band break-ups caused by differences in artistic or political opinions, or even by weird reasons – as in the case of Sun Ra's criticism of Archie Shepp and Cecil Taylor because of their disinterest in "Intergalactic things" (Piekut 2011: 114). Evan Parker did not see the concept of "non-idiomatic" as a good enough point of agreement for him to continue playing with Bailey.[1]

The flaw lies in the concept. Bailey's choice of the "idiom" as the field of discrimination between what is free and what is not reveals his debt to research in "much earlier developments in musical language in European straight music." Bailey described how he resorted to the "intervallic manipulation of pitch," and the "differentiated changes of timbre," influenced partially by "some aspects of John Coltrane's improvisation," partially by "the music of Schönberg's pre-serial, 'free' atonal period, the later music of Webern and also certain electronic music composers" (Bailey 1993: 87 f., 107). The concepts of "idiom" and "language" as sets of "rules" are too abstract, especially with respect to concrete decisions on what to keep and what to change (later, in Section 8, I will return to Bailey's somewhat ambivalent attitude towards avant-garde music). Every "language," including musical ones, is embedded in a form of life. The criterion of the "non-idiomatic" fails when tested on the anthropological, social, ethical, and political factors implicit in musical contexts. As nothing can be changed completely and simultaneously, the decision as to what must remain and what must change in musical improvisation largely depends on different cultural factors, sometimes verging on singular gestures and tastes.

3 Positive (?) Concepts

Not even positive concepts such as "instant" or "rapid composition," (as Bailey already observed: Bailey 1993: ix), "composition in real time" and "here and now" help us understand what improvisation is. Against what yardstick are the instant and "real time" measured? The stopwatch? The time allotted for the concert? The psychological reaction of the musician or audience? When is "now?" When does the improviser's and/or the audience's perception change? Do the two perceptions change at the same moment?

Or, rather, is the measuring of "now" immanent to each musical poetic? For example, "now" is the whole time as well as each change in the "present" of an AMM improvisation (Cardew 1971, *Music is Erotic*); "now" is the "attention" paid throughout the "deep listening" time of a *Sonic Meditation* by

Pauline Oliveros (Oliveros 1984: 138–57; see also Gottschalk 2016: 107 ff., 133 ff.); "Now" is the time of the whole *A Rainbow in Curved Air* by Terry Riley, including each of its iridescences.

The meaning of these time concepts changes across different local contexts. Where is "here?" "Instant" or "rapid" have no meaning if used to refer to the person who sings or plays either alone or in a vernacular context (and not only to provide a recording for ethnomusicologists) without reading any musical score or repeating a piece of music from memory. This is the case with playing some *field-holler* or an Iraqi craftsman singing a *maqam* – none of them *want* to be "rapid."

None of them want to "compose." What does improvisation have to do with "composition," if not the obvious character of putting elements together? "Improvisation" came to deal with composition when it entered the field of the modern concept of "art," at the beginning of the 19th century. The word "composition" has been used to ennoble it, to ensure that it is not performed without preparation: a circumstance that shows its historical subordination to the Western paradigm of the completed written work. But in none of the previous examples does musical practice belong to "art" in the modern, Western sense.

Among the positive essential properties of improvisation, references have been made to "spontaneity", and to a feeling of freedom and "well-being" (McDonald and Wilson 2016: 112–116). These factors are present in good improvisations, but not exclusively. They can also be present in a very satisfying performance of a written score and in many other activities and experiences in life: in a happy love relationship, for example. These words do not define the sufficient conditions for improvisation, especially in the context of art.

Other positive properties have been identified in the "radical" approach to improvisation. As we have seen above, the "questioning […] of the 'rules' governing musical language" merged, in Bailey, with the search for the "unknown," the "unpredictability," the "unexpected," thanks to the "the ability to invent something, to add something, to *improve* something": a "renewal" in "improvising language" (Bailey 1993: 84, 57, 106–8). The idea of "a very pure form of improvisation" (Cardew 1971) has been and is currently shared by many free improvisers and critics. K. Stockhausen (1971) claimed for his "Intuitive Music" a total absence of clichés (see next Sections 7 and 8).

It is easy to understand why Bruno Nettl asks himself: "Is (Was) Folk Music Improvised?" (Nettl 2016: 172 ff.).

But Bailey's book surprisingly ends by stating:

> paradoxically and in spite of the earlier arguments, it seems to me now that in practice the difference between the free improvisation and idiomatic improvisation is not a fundamental one.
> *(Bailey 1993: 142; see also 123)*

So, what very different musical practices do we refer to with the word "improvisation" today, considering that Bailey himself ultimately states that the difference between free and idiomatic improvisation is not fundamental? Both the negative and the positive qualities listed seem inadequate to define the concept of improvisation.

4 Thing(s) and Words

I would like to say that improvising with one's own voice and/or with a musical instrument is as natural as speaking, conversing, singing or humming: it is not even necessary to define or justify it, just as it is neither necessary nor possible to justify and define speech.[2] The whole discussion could end here (see also Bailey 1993: 142). But an important musical and academic culture – mainly a written culture – and the Western paradigm of art have produced hierarchies of values against which to measure any improvised performance. Many people who love improvised music claim to

envy improvisers, but when I ask them why they don't try practicing improvisation themselves, they answer, "I am not good enough," or "It's too late" – even if they are still young – or because they "did not learn it at the conservatory"! In saying this, they are implying that every non-professional attempt at improvisation is not worthy of being called music. This devaluation has been internalized, becoming self-censorship. The yardstick is mainstream professional art music.

In our Western world, improvisation is discussed within the complex musical context of "art." Therefore, in order both to understand the different roles of improvisation and the various purposes it can serve, and to explain my proposal, it may be useful to consider – if only very briefly and in their Western aspects – the meanings of the words employed to refer to singing or playing without a written score or from memory, in their historical and geographical contexts and their relations with "art."

5 *Improvvisatori* and *Improvvisatrici*; "Canto a Braccio" o "Canto a Poeta"

The use of the word "improvisation" in Western European languages is due to the spread, between the second half of the 18th and the first half of the 19th century, of the translations of the terms *improvvisatore* (male) and *improvvisatrice* (female), used to describe Italian "oral" poets, especially from the areas of Naples, Rome and Tuscany. The word "improvisation" took on a European cultural dimension thanks to the appreciation by philology scholars (see Esterhammer 2016: 242 ff.) and also to literary works like Germaine de Stäel's *Corinne ou l'Italie* (de Staël 1807; see Simpson 2016) and Andersen's novel *Improvisatoren*, whose first English edition appeared in 1847 under the title *The Improvisatore: or Life in Italy* (Andersen 1847). Interest in *improvvisatori*'s art emerged in a media context in which "a culture of print" dominated poetic production, indeed with ambivalent aspects like the stenographical recording and printing of oral improvised poems in periodical publications (Esterhammer 2016: 241–2, 250–2). This interest was part of a cultural reaction against the lack of intimate bond with nature, the rising division of labor, its mechanicalness, the reduction of mankind to fragments, by the work of "culture" and the modern "state," as Friedrich Schiller warned in his sixth letter, *Upon The Aesthetic Education of Man* (Schiller 2002: 8).

Writers' and scholars' appreciation of *improvvisatori*'s art was inspired by the ideals of personal genius (Kant 2000: §§ 46 and 47) and of natural simplicity and spontaneity, which according to Winckelmann and Goethe, were best exemplified by the art of Classical Antiquity and by Mediterranean and Italian forms of living. However this "Romantic" (Esterhammer 2016) reception of this Italian poetry far from recognized its complex reality.

Peasant or shepherd poets active in the rural communities of southern and central Italy for a very long period of time, from the 16th to the 20th centuries, did not always call themselves "improvvisatori," but mostly they spoke of their "*canto a braccio*" o *"canto a poeta*" (Kezich 1986: 25). There was no antithesis between singing and writing or printing, nor a rigid separation between popular and high-culture sources (Clemente 1986; Kezich 1986: 79–84). This poetry was rooted in a largely, but not exclusively, oral culture: while mythological or chivalric repertoires were known to these poets and their audience through an oral tradition, some of them knew and drew upon printed texts.

These poets accompanied work in the fields and livened up convivial meetings, also through reciprocal challenges (Kezich 1986: 127). They were "the expression of a whole way of being together […] represented […] in the pastoral iconography that the octave in itsef claims" (Kezich 1986: 84; my translation: D.G.[3]). Their ability was in making the singing flow, so as not to break the rhyme pattern. To achieve this skill some poets reported that they let themselves be gripped by "*furore*" (i.e., frenzy). This was experienced as a gift and a contact with nature, in a sort of "*aurora della coscienza*" (dawn of consciousness) state (Kezich 1986: 38,74, 83).

This state of not completely intentional and conscious action is the aspect that comes closest to our current concept of improvisation. But their *inventio* had nothing to do with the search for innovation, and less still with the unexpected. Even musical invention was pursued according to standard forms (Agamennone 1986). So, such practices hardly fit the Romantic, 19th century concept of "improvvisatore," and even less the 20th-century concept of "pure" poetry or artistic improvisation. Indeed, early 20th-century poetry critics A. Vitagliano and B. Croce stigmatized what they considered to be the vacuity, formalism and lack of "originality" and artistic qualities of that "extemporaneous poetry" (Kezich 1986: 23, 124).

I also doubt that the concept of "extemporaneous," as used in criticism, fits well the meaning given to these practices by their performers. That concept only has meaning in opposition to something that is not such because its temporal development is carefully prepared in advance in all its decisive passages. The genealogy of the expression "*ex tempore*" can be traced back to a certain ability in a professional context of speech, made possible and legitimized by great experience in writing and reading. The "*ex tempore dicendi facultas*" is an answer to an unexpected accidental need ("*innumerabiles accidunt subitae necessitates*"), made possible by "*multus stilus et adsidua lectio et longa studiorum aetas*" (Quintilianus X, 7: 1, 2, 4). Scholars during the Renaissance translated the word *αὐτοσχέδιον*, used in Aristotle's *Poetics*, as "*ex tempore*" (Caporaletti 2005: 120), assigning it a rather *defective* meaning: indeed, they were men of letters. So, the use of the word "extemporaneous" fits those vernacular practices only from "our" (as well as from Vitagliano's and Croce's) literate, point of view. But what is the point of calling a work song "extemporaneous?" It follows the particular time of that work. What is the point of calling a song at a convivial gathering or contest "extemporaneous," when the flow of the song and the pleasure it brings have an essential part in constituting that time?

6 Partimenti, Fantasieren, Improvisieren

In Western music theory, singing and playing without performing a score or from memory has come to be known as *contrapunctus* "*alla mente,*" in contrast to the performance of a complete piece of music: *res facta* (Caporaletti 2005: 92, 118: Lorenzetti 2017). In Baroque music, a certain prevalence of writing is documented by the use of "*partimenti*": written scores that helped musicians both better perform written composition and improvise (Guido 2017).

At the end of the 18th century there was talk of "*fantasieren*" rather than "*improvisieren*." The word "improvisation" appeared in music, as in poetry, with Romanticism (Koch 1802; see Caporaletti 2005: 121). *Fantasieren* and *improvisieren* were practiced by composers such as Mozart, Beethoven, Paganini and Hummel, and were listened to by an audience that appreciated improvised music, especially if it possessed "a number of clearly recognizable formal requisites" (Carone 2018: 11 f.).

In the 19th century, somewhat "free forms" also appeared, yet within the prevailing compositional context. In music theory the idea emerged of composing music whose form developed immanently:

> It is possible and admissible to renounce any and every pre-existing form, to sacrifice it to the freedom of our spirit that does not recognize any law outside of itself […] it is the freedom of the one that is acquainted with all directions and all paths and who can therefore cross over among them, end even proceed in a zig-zag, without ever getting lost.
>
> *(Marx 1856/7 vol. 3: 336, quoted in Borio 2018: 65)*

The idea of an "organic" immanent development of the "spirit" and its forms was already expounded by philosophers and poets in the late 18th and early 19th centuries – from Herder to Goethe, from

Schelling and Hölderlin to Hegel. It endured in some form in 20th-century concepts of improvisation. We find similar statements being made by late 20th-century improvisers, whose

> subconscious aim is probably to invent a form unique for every performance […]. As Evan Parker says: "Improvisation makes its own form."
>
> *(Bailey 1993: 111–2)*

7 An Ideology of Novelty in Composition, in Improvisation

In the 19th century, improvisation was also used as a model for compositional invention. After the Romantic appreciation of the originality of improvisation, starting around 1850, improvisation declined, but was imitated in compositions called "Fantasia" (Esterhammer 2016; Gooley 2016; Borio 2018: 69 ff.). Innovation was sought, above all, in written composition, within a historicist horizon. The words "revolution," "future" and "progress" entered the vocabulary of composers, from Wagner (1872a, 1872b) to Schönberg (1976). Adorno established the distinction between the "progressive" Schönberg and the "reactionary" Stravinsky, claiming that jazz improvisation also belongs to a *reactionary* music form (Adorno 1975, 1982: 80; Adorno and Benjamin 1994: 175).

The "avant-gardes" intensified the search for novelty as a radical break with old social and aesthetic habits, through the artistic metabolizing of the elements of shock (Dada) and surprise (surrealism) (Benjamin 1991a, 1991b), also thanks to improvisation (Wallace 2016). In 1921, the futurist manifesto *L'improvvisazione musicale* by Mario Bartoccini and Aldo Mantia took up the mantle of the Romantic idea of originality, radicalizing its task as the "absolute destruction of all musical laws" through "free improvisation." According to this view, "any harmony or motif already listened to" had to be avoided, so as to eliminate the "obsession with tempo, structure, rhythm, and formal laws." "Free improvisation" was seen as creating an "infinite originality of brilliant ideas," capable of "electrifying forcefully and immensifying music with genius, a sublime art and, at the same time, a very effective hygiene of social elevation" (Bartoccini and Mantia 1921; my translation: D. G.).

Leaving aside the overly emphatic futurist language, some relevant features of this "ideology of novelty" (Piekut 2011: 75) are detectible even in the intentions, statements and practices of many improvisers from the second half of the 20th century (Goldoni 2018). The aim of producing "unforeseen," "surprising" music through a renewal of "language" – as we have seen in Bailey – *seems* to fit perfectly with the meaning of "improvisation," recalling its presumed origins in the concept of *improvisus*: so much so that for many musicians and scholars it has become the very benchmark for improvisation.[4]

8 Some Means to Freedom Have Become Rules

The "linguistic" and technical musical inventions developed between the Forties and Seventies, along with the practice of listening to music from other cultures, has generated a potentially common set of materials, practices and knowledge conducive to both improvisation and composition, offering an opportunity similar to that which Evangelisti spoke of in the Sixties, in an analogy with the use of a common linguistic heritage in Indian musical improvisation (Evangelisti 1991: XVII–III, 31–5).

On the other hand, linguistic innovation in improvisation has slowed down since, if not ceased. For some time now, even "free" jazz (and I would also say: "free improvisation")

> has turned […] into a music as formal, as ritualized and un-free […] it now seems to have very little existence outside the perennial festivals at which it presents its stars demonstrating whatever it was that made them stars
>
> while still maintaining a "peripheral role" in the "main body of jazz."
>
> *(Bailey 1993: 56)*

Some historical prohibitions towards classical or jazz stylistic clichés ended up becoming elements of "standard" musical genres, with recognizable styles and recurrent behaviors and expedients. For example:

- a determined avoidance of "tonal pitch-duration materials," or "conform to established linguistic usages;" use of wide intervals, preferably at the limits of the instrument's register; clusters; no chords; no isochronous pulse; sudden, even violent attacks; also very high and painful volumes. Frequent escape from the beautiful timbre invented for voices and instruments by the traditional performing practices and constructive techniques, abundant use of "extended techniques."[5]
- In a collective improvisation, each musician listens to the other improvisers, *imitating* or *integrating* what they are doing for a while, then she/he preferably *does* "*the opposite*" – in its very radical, extreme interpretation: any musical idea that might suggest a "development" will be disturbed or interrupted as quickly as possible; but after a while, since continuous interruption could be boring, the group might switch to a static situation by creating individual or collective "drones" with long sounds, tremolo, trill, flutter-tongue, without ever suggesting a tonal chord, but creating clusters with non-synchronous durations.
- In venues where a more traditional audience expects to recognize something familiar, the group might start with a rather simple theme, then improvise "freely" without any necessary reference to it; after a while, the music will return to the theme and concludes the piece; this return will reassure the audience that it has "understood" the music, while the control of the duration of the piece confirms that this is a "concert" and "art."

The similar behaviors and expedients here summarized, in a somewhat parodistic way, are not so far from what can be heard in performances by devout followers of the pioneers of free improvisation. However, part of the responsibility also lies with the pioneers.

The above mentioned prohibition of using "tonal pitch-duration materials" or "materials [that] conform to established linguistic usages" is taken from the exercises suggested by Franco Evangelisti for the *Nuova Consonanza* group (Evangelisti 1991: 69 ff.); the suggestion to "do the opposite," or to produce a "contrast", in relation to the collective improvisation as a "compositional process," is taken both from Evangelisti (ibid.) and from V. Globokar's *Reacting* (Globokar 1970).

According Globokar, "doing the opposite" plays a major role with respect to other more "instinctive" and "intuitive" modes of "reaction" (imitation, integrate oneself, hesitate). It has a "compositional function," while "doing something different" fosters the "invention," but also exposes the performance to the risk of "the impredictable, not only the strictly musically impredictable but also the aesthetically impredictable" (Globokar 1970): a musical situation that Globokar does not consider "fruitful" and "constructive," because the performance should be coherent be coherent with some "stylistic" and aesthetic features, albeit produced through a collective invention. "Doing the opposite" is practiced through the "dissection into parameters":

> […] from the very moment one demands him to react to a model, doing the opposite, he [the performer] has to rapidly analyse the situation, *dissect it into parameters* in order to become able to subsequently decide what could be the opposite of the heard situation […]. One type of material, proposed with maximum loudness, static, in a deep register, will be "opposed" according to the individuals in *one, two or even all three parameters at the same time,* whether it be ppp but remaining static and deep, moving and high but remaining fff, or ppp and high but remaining static, etc.
>
> *(Globokar 1970. My italics: D. G.)*

Why does "doing the opposite" help? I suppose that, for Globokar, it could give collective improvisation some recognizable, albeit fleeting, structural points of departure and perspectives for further development: this helps make the improvisation similar to a composition.

I would like to observe that the existence of *the* opposite presupposes an overall knowledge of the semantic context. In music, doing "the opposite" would be a gesture that implies a complex process: first of all, an evaluation of *all* the dimensions involved; then an analysis useful for extracting, among the many dimensions, those that have most "weight" (and here the tacit sharing of the judgment parameter is assumed); and, finally, an action that responds to the result of the analysis in an antithetical way.[6] Even in the version suggested by Globokar, where each opposite is determined within a given parameter, there should be unanimity in regard to the value of what happens in that parameter, as distinct and autonomous from the others. (If, while one is playing a drone in central C, I sneeze, what is it the opposite of?) "The opposite" can be produced only in the context of a strict control of the musical material and of its reception. So, I would like to ask: isn't this concept of "free composition" – far from being necessary – strictly conditioned historically? Globokar's "opposite" presupposes a univocal analysis of the musical "elements," according to their dissection into traditional parameters. However, many other ways of creating a difference, a contrast or even a "dissection" are possible, according to different musical poetics and strategies. For example, at a Ca' Foscari workshop and performance held on 27 January 2012, entitled "Deep Listening," we performed *Tuning Meditation*, *The Heart of Tones* and *From Unknown Silences* by Pauline Oliveros, who was present and instructed us. We mostly worked with differences. The concept of opposition was not particularly helpful; nor was it useful for understanding and deciding how to carry out, in December 2018, our performance of *Paragraph 7* from Cardew's *The Great Learning*.[7]

More generally speaking, during a free improvisation performance, it may happen that one musician plays a traditional timbre, while others emit unorthodox sounds; that one musician follows a certain rhythm, while others follow different ones; that one musician plays softly, another loud and another still remains silent. Is there an opposition between these ways of playing? What is the criterion for deciding whether there is an opposition or an affinity, or even if these sonic differences are aspects of a unique sound? Indeed, these are all differences that may have a place in a piece of music, but they are not necessarily oppositions.

"Doing the opposite" – like Evangelisti prohibiting the use of "tonal pitch-duration materials" – belongs to *negative* musical intentions in relation to given conventions and "aesthetic" expectations (see also Gottschalk 2016: 193), not to some musical material in itself. Indeed, a negation is effective only if it is "determined" (as Spinoza and Hegel taught). In *Reacting*, it is determined in the context of the "dissection into parameters." Each musically cultivated Western improviser has more or less consciously introjected musical writing and its organization into traditional parameters and elements, as Globokar himself partially demonstrates in his nonetheless illuminating text. Evangelisti spoke of the "total chromatic" of the twelve notes (Evangelisti 1991: 69). Not surprisingly, someone did say that, in the Sixties, musicians "improvised Darmstadt" (Guaccero 2013: 61 n.).

The metamorphosis of the prohibitions on classical and jazz forms into new clichés is to some extent due to the strong resilience, in the "avantgarde" culture, of basic elements of Western compositional concepts and musical language. In *Towards an Ethic of Improvisation*, Cornelius Cardew explicitly denounced the existence of a problem in the relationship between the modern "compositional techniques" and improvisation:

> In 1957 when I left The Royal Academy of Music in London complex compositional techniques were considered indispensable. I acquired some – and still carry them around like an infection that I am perpetually desirous of curing. Sometimes the temptation occurs to me that if I were to infect my students with it I would at last be free of it myself.
>
> *(Cardew 1971, Virtues that a Musician can Develop)*

While accepting suggestions and elements from avant-garde languages, Bailey affirmed the essential difference between free improvisation, avant-garde music and "experimental" music (see Bailey 1993: 83). However, as we have seen, one could find some ambivalence in his attitude towards the relationship between innovation of the musical language and free improvisation. He declared its debt to "the results of much earlier developments in musical language in European straight music" (Bailey 1993: 84; 87 ff., 107), but he was looking for an even more "malleable" language. In a footnote of the 1980 edition of *Improvisation*, he suggested a list of means useful to get it, by combining note with non-notes by "preparing" the instrument without a "fixed" preparation,

> constructing intervals from mixed timbres, a greater use of ambiguous pitch (e.g., the less "pure" harmonics – 7th onwards), compound intervals, moving pitch (which includes glisses and microtonal adjustments), coupling single notes with "distant" harmonies, horizontally an attempt to play an even mix of timbres, unison pitches with mixed timbres.

That footnote was suppressed in the 1992 edition. Had it been considered "misleading"? The footnote continues:

> – elements of this kind, and many others, proved useful. But the appearance of those elements in a list such as this is misleading. A vocabulary only achieves whatever significance it might have through its use as a part of a language.

Did Bailey aim to avoid any codified appropriation of his own vocabulary? Perhaps, yet his language has become quite recognizable and, in a sense, idiomatic, imitable and imitated.

With regard to the topic of the rigorous avoidance of musical clichés, another somewhat paradoxical example comes to mind. Claiming the total absence of clichés in relation to his own "intuitive music," K. Stockhausen criticized Globokar's "improvisation" for maintaining "certain stylistic elements" (Stockhausen 1971). On 15 November 1971, at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London, a tape recording of Stockhausen's ES was played, then a discussion took place about Intuitive Music. The interviewer put forth a question:

> *Question:*
> I would like to return to the relation of style and Intuitive Music. Isn't the last piece that you played for us recognizable in any way as a piece which you composed, as compared to another composer who also writes a text which gives rise to an intuitive performance? Are you not really trapped in some way by something which is recognizable as your piece of music and not that of another composer?
>
> *Stockhausen*: Yes, there is something to that […] I am a myth.
>
> *(Stockhausen 1971)*

The issues mentioned above in relation to Globokar, Evangelisti, Bailey, Stockhausen and Cardew indicate the existence of a problem in the relationship between modern techniques of composition, Western ambitions in terms of linguistic innovation and what has come to known as "pure" or "free" improvisation. Those difficulties and paradoxes reflect a theoretical and historical question: were (are) the avant-garde, "experimentalism" and improvisation deeply interconnected or even to some extent opposed? (See Nyman 1999: 1 ff.; Piekut 2011; 2019: 387 ff.; Gottschalk 2016: 188 ff.).

9 Palimpsests

"Canonical experimentalism" (see also Piekut 2011: 196; Gottschalk 2016) has mostly taken refuge in academic institutions and specialized festivals. The ethical or political commitment of the Sixties – democratic, liberal, revolutionary, anti-racist or "colorblind"; feminist or gender-deconstructive; from Henry Flynt to Bill Dixon; from Max Roach and the AACM to the Art Ensemble of Chicago and to Pauline Oliveros (Piekut 2011; Fischlin and Heble 2013; Steinbeck 2017) – lives on, but its voice still remains foreign to most young people, as well as those with less economic, social and cultural capital, be they European, American, African American, Latin American or of any other ethnic background: people who, according to the ideas of the Sixties, should have been the main recipients and actors of social change for the best also, thanks to the suggestions and practices of that experimentalism, even extended "otherwise" (Piekut 2011, 2019; see also Gooley 2016: 199).

In jazz and its surroundings, the task of "innovation" has again been assigned to composition. For example, John Zorn and Steve Coleman are improvisers and composers. George Lewis has also written contemporary music featuring improvised parts (*Les Exercises Spirituels* of 2010). Novelties have come in the form of Steve Lehman's octets, where composition plays a fundamental role, and in Anna Webber's compositions. Composition and improvisation nourish each other in contexts such as the *Bang on a Can* festivals.

In the most effectively communicated and best managed Western/global scene for jazz improvisation, the current improviser represents a kind of palimpsest, where one can read traces of the Romantic ideal of "genius" (Gioia 1988), some "free forms," materials from avant-garde "languages," a use of patterns not too different from the ancient use of "*partimenti*" and a use of interplay not too far from the challenges faced by "*improvvisatori*" and "*a braccio*" poets. In these more traditional aspects of improvisation, what emerges is the value of "playing" in itself (see Winnicott 1991: 65). This is of no small value, as an improviser who can hardly be accused of conformism acknowledged:

> Yes, improvisation is a sport *too*, and a spectator sport, where the subtlest interplay on the physical level can throw into high relief some of the mystery of being alive.
>
> *(Cardew 1971)*

In this respect, a lot of jazz improvisation has become almost "classical": not in the sense that is claimed as America's "Classical Music" (Taylor 1986; see also Bailey 1993: 56), but because some of its practices resemble those *en vogue* between the end of the 18th and the early 19th century.

10 The Aestheticization of Society

The standardizing of improvisation in terms of styles and genres, as well as its distance from the forms of life in which it was originally intended to foster a change, is not exclusively due either to the existence of schools, nor to "records" that "ruin the landscape" (Grubbs 2014). It is clear that improvisation does not coincide with its recording (Cardew 1971, *The problems of recording*; Bailey 1993: 103 f.). However, once one knows this, a recording can help an improviser identify some details that went unnoticed while improvising – analogously to the capacity of a camera to reveals something the naked eye did not notice (Benjamin 1991b). A recording may suggest possibilities for live music. For example, the recorded sounds of Miles Davis' or Chet Baker's trumpets influenced the way in which many trumpeters searched for their own live sound, which is not to be seen as a flaw.

Generally speaking, the reasons for a historical change are never only technological but depend on changes in the complex relationships between media (including economic ones: Goldoni 2019) and culture within a form of life.

Experimentalism – in a wide and deep sense – can only exist if it is possible *to have an experience* in the sense of learning something about oneself, the world and life, and of sharing and passing on this learning (Benjamin 1991c; Dewey 2009; Bertinetto 2012, 2018: 79 ff., 97 ff.).

By the first half of the 20th century, Benjamin had already warned his readers about the decline of experience as a possible way of building a shared memory, tradition and wisdom. Experience was replaced, especially in the metropolises, by individual relationships with persons and things, and private memories. Nevertheless, in the Sixties, in USA and Europe, certain forms of musical experimentalism and improvisation met the interest of participants in, or sympathizers of, radical political movements (albeit with misunderstandings and internal conflicts. See Piekut 2011). In improvisation, the strongest drive for innovation was linked to a will of social and political change. Linguistic innovation was primarily the sign and result of an immanent urge for self-expression within shared alternative life perspectives. But from around the 1980s onwards, political change in the United States and Europe progressively eroded the ground that legitimized those "radical" musical practices within society and the "art" system. Innovation has once again become the goal of composers' authorship. This happens mostly within the main networks of production, distribution and communication institutions. The use of music has become – even more so than in the Fifties – a private matter within different trends and market segments (Peterson and Rossman 2007).

Since the end of the 20th century, the difficulty of making music a means of emancipation has been reinforced by the general *aestheticization* of Western-global life, where individuals are engaged in a compulsive, narcissistic search for exciting novelties (Boltanski and Chiapello 2005; Reckwitz 2017a, 2017b; Goldoni 2019). Avant-garde techniques of shock and discontinuity with existing traditions have been adopted by the "new economy" and its hard experimentalism on our lives, which offers wonderful new technological opportunities, yet also threatens the possibility of a real experience. Media overexposure (Shane 2000) gives people gestures and voices outside themselves. This is not without consequences on the form of life.

11 Experimentalism Otherwise.[8] Inhabiting Improvisation

Sound – first of all that of the human voice – enables us to be aware of the non-separation between mind and body, inside and outside, other humans, certain animals (Gottschalk 2016: 166; Rothenberg 2016) and the environment. Its communication is faster than verbal semantics, which often requires discursive mediations. Sounds send signals and create shared, qualitatively determined atmospheres, as smell, light, space and the weather do. Musical sound immediately affects each person who finds herself/himself within hearing range, whether she/he likes it or not. This is all the more the case with one's voice. That voice is that human being or a meaningful aspect of her/him. People's voices *are* those people. *Music is not only sound, but the sound of a form of life* insofar as it is a voice for us: *vocat*, it calls us to live in a certain way. After the discovery and investigation of sound by 20th-century musical theory and practice (Cage 2013: 3 ff., 7 ff.; Solomos 2013; Gottschalk 2016: 21, 64, 164 ff.), we have to return to voices, whether natural or instrumental. *Let's reclaim our voices and place!*

This may be possible by using improvisation as a means to become aware of our inhabiting the sound and voices of the places we live in. Cardew chose inhabiting as a very effective metaphor for improvisation:

> A city analogy can also be used to illustrate the interpreter's relationship to the music he is playing. I once wrote: "Entering a city for the first time you view it at a particular time of day and year, under particular weather and light conditions. You see its surface and can form only theoretical ideas of how this surface was moulded. As you stay there over the years you see the light change in a million ways, you see the insides of houses – and having seen the

> inside of a house the outside will never look the same again. You get to know the inhabitants, maybe you marry one of them, eventually you are inhabitant – a native yourself. You have become part of the city. If the city is attacked, *you* go to defend it; if it is under siege, *you* feel hunger – you are the city. When you play music, *you* are the music."
>
> *(Cardew 1971)*

Improvisation rebuilds the singularities of the musicians into a network of shared, interrelated fluxes, into a natural-human landscape. Improvisers learn to inhabit this landscape, to love it and to take care of it and of its inhabitants. The emotional aspect – Cardew also speaks of "love" – highlights a concept of time that is totally different from the emphasis on novelty and the instant:

> Love is a dimension like time, not some small thing that has to be made more interesting by elaborate preamble. The basic dream – of both love and music – is of a continuity, something that will live forever. The simplest practical attempt at realising this dream is the family. In music, we try to eliminate time psychologically... to work in time in such a way that it loses its hold on us, relaxes its pressure. Quoting Wittgenstein again: "If by eternity is understood not endless temporal duration but timelessness, then he lives eternally who lives in the present."
>
> *(Cardew 1971,* Music is Erotic; *see Wittgenstein 2019: prop. 6.4311)*

The present of improvisation is not the revealing instant, nor the *kairos* of opportunity, which exist, however, thanks to the "awakeness" (Cardew 1971, *Virtues that a Musician can Develop*) within the within the time. This present is not an atom. It is more like a *monad* (see Adorno and Benjamin 1994: 380 f.), full of resonances that lead us away from the traces of our memory toward the possible. *Improvisation makes experience the present as the possible in itself.*[9]

(This is not to be understood as a definition. Every gesture has this potential, more or less intensively. The sentence above is rather the description of a property of human praxis that, in musical improvisation, occurs in a clearer, more exemplary way than in the performance of a complete composition.)

12 Porosity, Awareness

We experience something similar at the improvisation and composition workshops held at Ca' Foscari University for students following any curriculum, not necessarily only the ones planning to become professional musicians. This experience also aims to recognize the current role of so-called "free improvisation" and to identify productive relationships with composition (sometimes, parts of improvised music will find their way into a written composition). The thoughts and practices developed by the "free improvisation" of the Sixties, in order to avoid "tonal" or rhythmic materials that might condition too univocally the development of the performance and prevent the contribution by each one – listening to other musicians, imitating, integrating or doing something different – should not be taken as formal rules. Those indications are useful in a different way, if they are taken as precautions, with the aim of producing a collective "porous" improvisation – I use a concept used by Benjamin about another example of inhabiting (Neaples):

> As porous as this stone is the architecture. Building and action interpenetrate in the courtyards, arcades, and stairways. In everything, they preserve the scope to become a theater of new, unforeseen constellations […]. Porosity results not only from the indolence of the southern artisan, but also, above all, from the passion for improvisation.
>
> *(Benjamin 1996: 416)*

In our workshops, everyone is invited to listen to the sound, to use the sounds and technical elements that are closest to his/her musical feeling, without excluding in principle any material, be it classical or vernacular, tonal or atonal (see also Han Bennink in Bailey 1993: 123). The issue is not the material used, but the way it is used. The music you hear and make says a lot about you: just like how you move, use your hands, look, and smile reveals something about you – "When you play music, you are the music." Improvisation (can I give my voice or the voice of my instrument to another?) tests the resonance of myself with the environment, with others. If a sound has entered me and still lives in me, the best thing I can do is to bring it out, and test it through my listening and the listening of others. If possible, I will choose whom to play with, just as I will try to choose whom I talk with, to clarify my thoughts to myself; but unknown people, their voices and environmental sounds are also welcome. Improvisation needs generosity.[10] If afterwards my voice no longer sounds right – for example, if it sounds overly emphatic, or emitted above all to please, to elicit admiration or even to dominate others – maybe I will become aware of this thanks to what others are doing; then I will look for a different direction. The landscape will change and, as an improviser, I will change in it, keep track of the change, learning something small – or maybe not so small.

This mode of improvising is a real experience.

(If something new happens, this is a result, not the purpose of my action. The present is ever young.)

Notes

1 Evan Parker confirmed this in the interview I conducted in Dolo (Venice) on March 25th, 2017.

2 It would be a *petitio principii*.

3 "L'espressione di tutto un modo di stare insieme […] raffigurato […] nell'iconologia pastorale che l'ottava rivendica in sé."

4 In addition to Bailey and among many other more or less "radical" improvisers, see: Evangelisti (1991); Globokar (1970); Stockhausen (1971). Among musicologists, see for example: Caporaletti's distinction between improvisation and extemporization (2005: 98–170), Bormann et al. (2010: 7 ff.); Sparti (2016); Goehr (2016: 460 f., 470) sees the search for the unexpected and innovative aspects in the *impromptus* rather than in the *extempore*.

5 Examples for brass instruments: circular breathing; multiphonics; ambiguous pitch; with or without different mutes mutes: suppressed vocal-like etc. vocal-like articulation without words (chat, growl, grumble, moan, shout, scream…); play through the half pressed piston valves; play the instrument without the mouthpiece; blow in the instrument; sing in the instrument while playing it or while not playing it; use a saxophone mouthpiece; use the piston valves in a percussive way by slightly unscrewing the top valve caps; make a "popping" sound by abruptly extracting the valve slides; put a rubber tube into the bell flair, let its other side end in a bucket of water and then play; put a long rubber tube into the lead pipe, leave the instrument on the floor and play it from behind the scenes (this was done by Toshinori Kondo during a performance in the early Eighties in a small theatre in Mestre-Venice). Put the mouthpiece into a tube without the instrument and play (If I am not mistaken, this was done by Alvin Curran at concert during a conference of Nuova Consonanza in Rome, MACRO, on 14 December 2017) etc.

6 I discussed this topic with the composer Fabio Cifariello Ciardi, whom I thank for his availability and suggestions.

7 The "Deep Listening" workshop and concert of 2012 and the performance of Cardew's *Paragraph 7*, on 14 December 2018, took place at the Santa Margherita Auditorium of Ca' Foscari University, Venice, in the context of the "Musicafoscari" festival.

8 This is the title of Piekut 2011. I find that this expression properly indicates the problem I am also dealing with in the present text, although I must specify that the following observations and proposals are not intended to be a commentary on, nor an interpretation of, Piekut's book.

9 Piekut (2011: 19): "Experimentalism is where the everyday and the otherwise converge in an arena of grounded possibility."

10 McMullen talks about the practice of the "improvisative" as "a practice of continual generosity […]. As such, the improvisative is responsive, not reactive […]. Learning generosity takes time; you can't fake it. It has to be practiced and developed" (McMullen 2016: 122 f.).

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18

IMPROVISATIONAL *PHRONESIS*

Bruce Ellis Benson

1 Introduction

Improvisation is a deeply *political* act. That statement is meant to echo of Aristotle's observation that "man is a political animal" (*anthropos physei politikon zoon*).[1] As a species, our natural habitat is the *polis* – which we can translate as "the community" (not just *any* community but one large enough to allow for humans to flourish, in the fullest possible sense). Of course, Aristotle notes that bees and other "gregarious animals" are likewise communal in nature.[2] What separates us from them, according to him, is our ability to speak, which goes along with our ability to reason. Whether the line between our species and others may be drawn quite as firmly and simply as that is a question to be set aside in this chapter. For our purposes, let us instead note that our ability to speak is very close to our ability to sing and make music with instruments. Even if we can meaningfully speak of bird "song," which seems questionable, the human ability to sing complex songs that reflect on the past, comment on the present, and express longing for the future would seem to be a distinctive mark of our particular species. As human beings, we have also developed remarkably complex musical instruments such the piano and organ, both of which are marvelous technological innovations (thus exhibiting *techne* or technical ability).

Yet that ability to sing and make music is also "political" in the more common sense of that term, which concerns governing and power. Here we encounter somewhat of a problem. The word "politics" is often considered to be simply about "the government" (such as the parliament of the European Union or the congress of the United States). It is also often used disparagingly, such as when we label someone as "political" in the sense of scheming for power or influence. Further, unlike the ancient Greeks, we are used to separating the world into such realms as art, economics, politics, religion, and so forth – as if such distinctions actually hold in some strong sense. The reality, however, is that these things are very closely interwoven and are only separable *de jure*. Governing is something that goes far beyond any formal governmental structure. We are "governed" by rules of etiquette, moral expectations of family and wider society, and many quite specific expectations that come through both voluntary and involuntary association with other people. One does not need to read Foucault to see that various modes of power are *always* part of human society, so that "politics" is at work in every facet of our lives. In this sense, everyone and everything is "political."

Certainly the "art world" is not free from politics, nor is it disconnected from "the political." To be sure, Kant effectively sidelined of the realm of art to something involving the what he termed the "free play of the faculties" (Kant 1987: 61), making it seem like some sort of "add-on"

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to the "real" business of human existence – something that only advanced cultures are able to afford and something removed from and unaffected by the "real" world. While that sidelining may be somewhat true of "highbrow" art (though only *somewhat*), it is utterly false regarding the kind of art (music, painting, advertising graphics, videos, etc.) that everyone experiences on a daily basis. The idea that "art" exists in some independent realm magically free from politics is pure fantasy. Artists *often* make explicitly political statements (i.e., about "the government," though also about society and power relations in general) through their art. Highbrow art is deeply connected to the economic market; paintings and sculpture are often purchased for the same reasons as people buy stocks and bonds.

Yet, of course, the reduction of all cultivated art to aestheticism is untenable. There are many *art worlds* (as well as philosophical worlds) that seem detached from reality. Whether we like it or not, much of art is largely self-referential. Still, it belongs to the world of art. More important, a quick survey of human history makes it clear that we have *always* been artistic beings. What we today would single out and call "art" has been an integral feature of virtually all human cultures. The ability to sing and play instruments, to celebrate festive occasions or go to war or simply to enjoy ourselves, appears to be just as ancient as our ability to speak. Indeed, there is growing evidence from cognitive science that song may actually be as basic and perhaps even *more* basic than speech.[3] Art is a *fundamental* way in which we both experience social relationships in the moment and articulate a vision for social relationships in the future. How we improvise together in a musical way is every bit as important as how we do everything else in life.

In this chapter, the focus will be on the political aspect of improvisation – how it forms communities, how it challenges political power, and how it intertwines the aesthetic and the ethical in such a way that they cannot be removed from one another. Although the point of view of this chapter is deeply informed by my own experience as a jazz musician (having played in both ensembles and solo contexts), the overall point concerns art in general. While I have attempted to make the case that *all* artistic endeavor is fundamentally improvisational in nature elsewhere,[4] I will take that as a given here. If we consider jazz as an example of improvisation that has political consequences, those political ramifications appear very quickly. It is safe to say that jazz has often had an *explicitly* political role in oppressive societies. For example, Czech jazz musicians were instrumental (no pun intended) in protests that eventually led to the downfall of the Soviet Union. The Nazis forbade the performance of jazz once they came into power (since they considered it to be "degenerate" – a judgment based more on race than any aesthetic standard), but jazz flourished in the concentration camps – that is, in a place where degenerates were segregated from "healthy" society. Most of all, though, jazz developed in the United States in a deeply political way – one that put into question white America's oppression of African-Americans. And yet jazz allowed *everyone* to participate, regardless of race. It created a community that brought together musicians and listeners to hear and experience a kind of harmony for society that both enacted that harmony in real time and provided a vision for a harmonious community in the future. Long before Black musicians were allowed to play in highbrow ensembles (such as orchestras and chamber music groups), jazz provided a context in which Blacks, whites, and creoles (i.e., people of mixed race) were able to have harmonious communal relationships that helped pave the way for desegregation in the United States.

While the focus of this chapter will be on improvisation as a specifically *artistic* phenomenon, we must first start with the improvisational nature of existence in general. For artistic improvisation is a species under the genus of human improvisation, which is perhaps the most fundamental feature of our existence. We find ourselves in the world that existed long before we arrived on the scene and we attempt to make our lives out of what we find there. Although Aristotle speaks of this kind of practical acting as *phronesis*, I will be arguing that *phronesis* can be thought in terms of "improvisation." However, to make any kind of sense of *phronesis*, we need to understand the relation of individual human beings to the *polis*.

2 The *Polis* and *Phronesis*

Aristotle takes it as a given that we are always part of a *polis*. One might put this as simply as the following: we are born into a world in which there is *already* a community that surrounds us.[5] In In actuality, there is no Hobbesian "state of nature" in which there are individuals who need to get together to form a community. Aristotle writes that "he who is without a *polis*, by reason of his nature and not of some accident, is either a poor sort of being or a being higher than man."[6] To be human *is* to be part of a *polis*. Yet here we come to a linguistic and conceptual problem: Aristotle's text in which he lays out his conception of communal relations is titled *Politica*, a that title that is normally rendered into English as "*Politics*." Yet that term is in no way captures the meaning of the Greek terms *politeia* and *polis*, with which Aristotle works. Still, the historical meanings of the word "politics" do give us some clues. It has meant such things (in the adjectival form) as wise, prudent, skillful, cultured, and (in the noun form) management, public affairs, and actions associated with power.[7] In the historical sense of the term, one shows oneself to be "political" by exhibiting wisdom, a deep understanding of one's culture, and an ability to get along with other people. In *that* sense, we are always involved in "politics" in everything that we do, even if we may be quite unaware of the political dynamics at play.

Aristotle believes that the structure of the *polis* is so foundational to human existence that it actually *precedes* that of the family (a rather counterintuitive claim). What he means is that family and all other sorts of communal relations reflect its basic structure. Of course, Aristotle is saying much more than that human beings depend on one another to survive. At issue here is the notion of *thriving*. We might well survive in a family, but we need a *polis* in order to realize our true potential as human beings. Since the *telos* of human beings is to be rational, which includes speech (since this is a structural component of rationality), one can only imagine both rationality and speech developing and thriving in a shared context with a wide variety of people, who exhibit a wide variety of skills. While it is certainly possible for one to mutter to oneself, it would be hard to imagine anything like an advanced language evolving if it were not used to communicate with others and, thus, was shared with others. One does not need to refer to Wittgenstein's private language argument to make such a point clear.

While Aristotle makes a distinction between political and non-political senses of "community" (*koinonia*), that distinction does not line up with our usual conception of the "political." True, families are non-political in the sense that they are not composed of "equal" members or citizens. But the *polis* is *fundamentally* about justice and equality for its members: as he says, "justice is the organization of a political community."[8] An "unjust" *polis* is, in effect, a contradiction. What Aristotle would consider "political" is anything that free citizens share in common, which would include art, business, education, religion, and sports. The economics of running a household (*oikos*), in contrast, would be non-political in nature since it involves individual family members rather than citizens as a whole. Of course, the issue of justice is already an aspect of the family. Aristotle believes that the husband rightly rules over the wife and children, who are "inferior" to him.[9] He distinguishes between natural slaves (those whose *telos* is to be a slave) and those who simply happen to be slaves due to circumstance. Justice is served precisely when the person who is rightly the "master" rules over those who are either by nature or misfortune slaves, as well as those who are "below" him.

Yet how do we know what the "just" action is in any given case? Aristotle's answer might seem at first quite unsatisfying: we simply *do* by examining the situation, the persons involved, and all the circumstances that frame an action. We are able to make such decisions and to act by way of *phronesis* – practical wisdom. The person who possesses such wisdom and is able to exercise it in practice is the *phronimos*. *Phronesis* is three-fold for Aristotle. It is the ability: (1) to know what is important, (2) to know how to bring that important thing about, and (3) actually to do so.

Anything short of right action is not true *phronesis*. Given this emphasis on action, *phronesis* is concerned with specific situations and concrete actions. For instance, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle talks about "what is fitting […] in relation to the agent, and to the circumstances and the object."[10] By way of *phronesis*, we are able to acquire moral virtue, which Aristotle ultimately thinks is closely connected to political knowledge.[11] In contrast, *sophia* – theoretical reason – is not necessarily connected with action. What *sophia* gets us, instead, is knowledge of that which does not change – universal truths. It arrives at something we today call "science."

What Aristotle describes as *phronesis* could easily be re-described as *improvisation*. As improvisers, we constantly reshape that which is at hand rather than "create." Here I am deliberately juxtaposing the notion of improvising defined as to "fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand" to that of creating defined as "to produce where nothing was before."[12] *Phronesis* is inherently contextual. We find ourselves in a particular set of circumstances that involve other people, our place historically and geographically, and myriad other factors that set the stage for *phronesis* in motion. Aristotle believes that *phronesis* is the most basic way of human knowing and being in the world. While it is clear (at least for Aristotle) that intellectual virtues are ultimately superior to practical virtues, the latter are necessary for the proper operation of the former. A more powerful way of putting it, though, is by saying that wisdom and happiness of the highest order requires both, since *phronesis* is more basic and so is indispensable to *sophia*. This is an insight that turns out to be key for Martin Heidegger. On the way to *Being and Time*, Heidegger lectured repeatedly on Aristotle while at the University of Marburg. In a course on Plato's *Sophist*, Heidegger devotes a large portion of his lectures to book six of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, paying special attention to *phronesis* (Heidegger 1997: chap. 1). By the time of *Being and Time*, he writes that "knowing the world" (which Heidegger equates with the "knowing" of the natural sciences) is a "founded mode" of our relation to the world (Heidegger 1962: 13). In other words, we first encounter the world in the practical way of "living in it" and *then* we theorize about the world. *Phronesis* provides for us the "for which" and "the how." While Heidegger never uses the term *phronesis*, one can find this idea in his uses of *Umsicht* (circumspection), *Verstehen* (understanding), *Entschlossenheit* (resoluteness), and *Gewissen* (conscience).[13] So *phronesis* is central to the most basic form of human existence, which means that *theoria* is dependent upon it. We find a similar idea in Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception*: namely, that our everyday, practical embodiment in the world is the basis for any scientific or philosophical claims.

In *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle distinguishes between *phronesis* and *poiesis*. *Phronesis* has no end outside of itself; rather, it "is itself an end" since it is aimed at "acting well."[14] Another way of putting this is that *phronesis* is not geared toward creating a "product." Instead, it is about the action itself. In contrast, *poiesis* has an end that goes beyond itself – the production of some sort of artistic project, such as a painting or statue. While *phronesis* can certainly be "creative" or "innovative" in the sense of doing something "new," *poiesis* is the ability to create a new *something*. In that sense, it is very much like *techne*, which is the word Aristotle uses for the technical knowledge that results in a technological product. Yet here we come to perhaps the deepest and most central question regarding the *telos* of artistic activity. Is such activity directed at some end *outside of itself*? Or is it directed toward an end that is part and parcel of the activity itself? Let me put this a different way. The creation of a religious image – a statue of Mary, for example – could be seen as having an *outside* purpose – that of creating an art object. No doubt, in contemporary secular society, antique statues of Mary are bought and sold on eBay. They are treated as commodities that can be priced according to whether they are made of wood or stone, whether they date back to the 16th or 17th centuries, etc. Yet it is hard to see that the person who "made" such art intended it to be anything other than *internal* to a specific activity: worship. Indeed, to view it as a commodity would *not* be to view it as an object of veneration whose meaning was *completely* found in the actual practice of Christian worship.

And that question or distinction is fundamental to understanding *how* aesthetics and ethics are related. In what follows, we will consider how this distinction is worked out in Western musical practice.

3 Artistic Freedom for Composers; Artistic Slavery for Everyone Else

In a very important sense, the history of what we today call "classical music" has come to be defined precisely by the distinction between *phronesis* and *poiesis* in a way that orders both aesthetics and ethics in quite peculiar but also exacting terms. Put simply: the goal of musical activity is to produce a product – like Beethoven's Ninth Symphony – and have that product "live on" by continual performances in the future. Accordingly, the function of the composer is to be the "creator" of something new that never existed before. He is the one who truly exercises *poiesis*. Only the composer has a truly "creative" function. Everyone else involved in the enterprise is, at best, a "sub-creator" who has considerably less room to be "creative." The principal function of the performer is to make the product created by the composer come "alive" again by following the latter's instructions as closely as possible. The function of the audience is to sit quietly and politely in order to listen attentively to each note. Each of them (performers and audience members) have specific but limited functions. To be sure, all are involved in *phronesis* of some sort (since composing, performing, and listening are certainly "activities" that require practical skills). Yet the composer has a special role that is far superior to that of performer and listener, since he (I use the male pronoun, since the vast majority of classical music composers have been white and male) has done something that the performers and listeners are only able to admire. They admire it by (1) being as faithful as possible in reproducing the exact notes and specifications that the composer has set in place and (2) listening with reverence and undivided attention. The composer has an exalted place in comparison, for he is the one who has the lion's share of the power. In a fully Aristotelian sense, the composer's *telos* is to rule over the performers and listeners (and even the conductors, who are given a bit more freedom than mere performers). The composer is equivalent to a free Aristotelian citizen; everyone else is something like a servant or slave doing the bidding of the composer. In order for there to be beauty and justice, each of the participants needs to know their place. The composer is *destined* to be in charge of music-making and the performers and listeners are likewise destined to act on his behalf.

We can put this another way. It is the *composer* who has the freedom to improvise. One way of thinking about this is that composers such as Mozart and Beethoven were *master* improvisers. Some who heard them improvise thought their improvisations were even greater than their published compositions. During their era, improvisation was one of the basic skills taught even to beginner students. Whereas the curriculum today of a beginner piano student is almost always the rote learning of very basic notated pieces of music, the curriculum of such a student two centuries ago was just as much about learning how to improvise either on such simple pieces or to create pieces of one's own in a somewhat spontaneous fashion.[15] Musicians in training were *set free* to improvise rather than simply follow the dictates of a composer. Further, compositions were themselves left *under-notated* with the assumption that competent performers would have the *phronesis* to know what needed to be filled in and what could or even should be altered.

I have painted this quick portrait of the political arrangement found in classical music to make it clear that, in such an account, ethics and aesthetics are fully interwoven and can hardly be pulled apart. Performers who start to "improvise" on the works of the great masters will only make a mess of the true masterpiece created by the master. They will also be "out of line" by not following the script in which the composer is in charge. Since only the composer has the role of "creating" art, he has political control of the entire musical community. Everyone else is merely a part of the "machinery," to serve the needs and ends of the composer and his composition. That

sense of "place" for the participants is completely wrapped up with a notion of "justice" in which those who are superior (to women, to slaves, to idiots, to children) are "right and just" to exercise dominion over those who are inferior.

Should anyone think that such talk is overblown, consider the following sentiments expressed by composers of the 20th century. Paul Hindemith relegates the performer to the role of being simply "the intermediate transformer station," whose duty is to "duplicate the preestablished values of the composer's creation" (Hindemith 1961: 153). Aaron Copland's version of the performer is "a kind of middleman" who "exists to serve the composer" (Copland 1957: 258). But no one can beat Igor Stravinsky for insisting that performers *stay in their place*. For him, the performer's duty is "the strict putting into effect of an explicit will [i.e., the composer's will] that contains nothing beyond what it specifically commands" (Stravinsky 1947: 127). Stravinsky attempts to browbeat performers into cowering "submission" (as he himself puts it). He deplores their "sins" against either the "letter" or "spirit" of a composition, their "criminal assaults" against the composer's text, and their "betraying" of the composer. He insists on nothing less than "the conformity of that presentation to the composer's will." Otherwise, the composer becomes a "*victim*" of performers (Stravinsky 1947: 129 f.).

What I find remarkable about this conception of musical activity is how little it has been questioned *in terms of the very clear ethical relations it demands*. While there is much to commend in Lydia Goehr's *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works*, I find it astonishing how little attention is paid specifically to the *ethical* implications of a musical culture designed to create museum pieces and exalt composers (Goehr 1992). To be sure, there are deep ontological aspects of such a conception of musical activity. Yet the ethical implications are considerably more important. Accordingly, I have tried to focus on how the centrality of work and composer has had profound (and deeply disturbing) ethical implications for classical music making (Benson 2003).

Of course, to suggest that there is anything truly "ethical" in such a conception of "community" is almost laughable. There is very little that could be termed "democratic" in such a model of music-making. Instead, it is largely a dictatorship that only functions aright if the "inferior" people follow the demands of the composer in a strict sense. Ethically speaking, that is their "place." We may criticize Aristotle for being "unenlightened" for his misogynism, approval of slavery, and the sheer frightening brio of his assumed superiority over other human beings. Yet the discourse of classical music, remarkably, reflects exactly such assumptions. It has traditionally marginalized women, people of color, and those musicians who participate in "inferior" forms of music making like the blues, country music, jazz, reggae, and rock. These forms of music are seen as *aesthetically* inferior to Western classical music. However, part of that condescension is based on *how* these other forms of music operate. They allow for considerable freedom on the part of performers and listeners. Performers are free to play songs and improvise as they see fit. Listeners are allowed to talk during the performance or start dancing. And such differences are both aesthetic and ethical. Put another way, the improvisational practices in these inferior genres of music allow for a kind of freedom not found in classical music. As such, these improvisational practices threaten the hegemony of the composer and of the entire classical music community. To be clear, while it is hard to maintain that jazz is *inherently* African-American in nature,[16] the kind of subversion of the musical system – or the hegemonic musical community known as "classical music – is very clearly a *central* part of jazz improvisation. I simply maintain that people of other races have had their own reasons to question the aesthetic and ethical structure that such a system upholds.

Of course, while we in the West are so used to the aesthetic and ethical system of classical music that we hardly even think about its existence and operation, the reality is that this conception of music-making – and the moral and communal situation it demands – represents a strange aberration in human history. Put otherwise, the norm of musical activity in human cultures across the world has historically been *very* different. At most, our politics of music making – with its aesthetic and ethical implications – has been in place for about two centuries. Moreover, even during those

early decades of such a political economy, there was still ample room allowed for performers to have a "creative" role. One only need think of Baroque performance practice and even the early decades of "classical" music (used in the narrow sense of that term) in which the cadenza remained a venue to show off the improvisational abilities of the performer. Over time, though, even those cadenzas came to be written in advance and, thus, lost most of their spontaneity.

Of course, as I have argued elsewhere, the goal of simple "reproduction" of a composer's composition is, in reality, *impossible*. The idea that one is playing a piece by Mozart "just as he would have heard it" is sheer nonsense and is, at best, a marketing gimmick. One cannot really *escape* from improvising, even if one tries (Benson 2005). Even the most "faithful" performer is always adding things of her own making, though it may well be that she does so unaware of exactly what she is doing. Claims of "historical authenticity" in performance should always be taken with a huge grain of salt. As the conductor Christopher Hogwood has admitted, much of the supposed "authenticity" heard in his recordings of past masters was sheer innovation on his own part. As he puts it, "there just wasn't enough evidence for all the things we were doing […]. It was just one invention on top of another all the time" (Badal 1985: 90). Listeners may be forced to be silent and only applaud at approved times – never between movements! But they are not mere couch potatoes either and have other ways of making their opinions known regarding what they are hearing.

4 Improvisation as a Quest for Communal Freedom

Aristotle may be correct in distinguishing between engaging in an activity and making a product. For example, the activity that is required to make a piece of furniture could be seen as largely "product" rather than "process" oriented. In such a view, whether the piece is the result of machine work or is done by hand, the only thing that really "matters" is the quality and usefulness of the end product. Such a point would be considerably more obvious regarding things that are both mass-produced and relatively simple, like plastic widgets or cardboard boxes. In such cases, it is hard to see the process as anything more than an aspect that, if possible, would be best left to robots rather than human beings. We don't really care much about how such objects are produced, except in cases where human beings are treated more like slaves. Otherwise, the more something is the product of mass production that is distanced from human activity, the less we are concerned about it. It would be difficult to "celebrate" whatever activity led to the "creation" of such objects, except in the sense of celebrating the innovation behind their design.

Yet the difficulty in such a distinction between product and process is that it may not necessarily hold, in a strong sense, for many things. While the production of IKEA furniture probably does not count as an "artistic" activity, the activity of *making* of a Steinway piano is something done from start to finish *by hand* and is not so easily separated from the activity of *playing* that piano. Both activities require a good deal of *phronesis*, though of differing sorts. Viewed on a wider scale, the activity of playing a piano and making one can be seen as a co-extensive artistic endeavor that is completely interdependent.[17] Moreover, the extent to which any of these activities are *simply* oriented toward a "product" is questionable. And that point can be made in regard to all the activity that falls under the broad category "music-making." For instance, pianos are made in order to be played. Performers who play the piano often learn pieces of music in order to have something to play. Performances on pianos are given in order for people to have something to hear. We listen to music because it makes us happy or stirs a sense of longing or enables dancing or for myriad other reasons. Aristotle believes that the end of all human endeavor is *eudaimonia*, which can be translated as "happiness" but is something more like "deep satisfaction." Music is one of the activities in which we can engage that lead to such deep satisfaction. Yet such satisfaction is not a "product." Moreover, satisfaction in one respect can spawn satisfaction in other respects. One can listen to music and find the peace or joy that makes other parts of one's life better.

The various types of *phronesis* involved in these activities can be seen as simply "different" but can also be seen as a kind of continuum. Surely those who make musical instruments have an interest in how they will sound, if for no other reason than bad sounding violins don't sell well. Violin makers are often violin players and certainly are among the audiences who listen to violin playing. Composers who write for the violin are making something that depends on their own knowledge of how the violin is played and the limits of what a violin player can do. But composers may also themselves be violin players. They are certainly going to be among those who listen (probably frequently) to violins being played. Those who play the violin are grateful both to those craftspeople who have expertise in violin making and to composers for giving them something to play. And listeners are often just as interested in *who* made the violin, *who* composed the piece being played, and *who* is playing it.

The goal in these last two paragraphs has been to establish that the activities that lead to music being heard are deeply connected to one another in such a way that focusing on simply *one* part leads to a misunderstanding of the whole. To be sure, one can privilege the violin maker (such as Stradivarius) or the composer (Mozart) or the performer (Perlman). But the reality is that all these people are part of a wider activity that needs all of these "sub" activities but would not be able to function very well were any one of these activities to be singled out as the "most important." There is no actual violinist without an actual violin; there is no reason to make a violin if there is no one who is able to play it. However, if all these players in this musical game are so deeply dependent upon one another, then the way in which we think about the activity of music-making in the world of "classical music" is both phenomenologically incorrect and ethically problematic. Not giving each person who participates in the activity her due is not simply an "ontological" failing but an ethical one as well.

Improvisation has often been celebrated for its "freedom." No doubt, the kind of freedom that one finds in improvised music is significantly greater than that found in classical music. Yet the kind of freedom that one finds, for instance, in jazz is what I am calling a "communal freedom." What I have in mind is not the idea that the community sets the "limits" on my freedom, though it does that *too*. Instead, I mean by communal freedom the idea that the musical *polis* gives us a *positive freedom* to be musical together. Being part of the jazz community opens up possibilities for individuals to express themselves *together*. While a significant aspect of the classical music paradigm (and the romantic artistic paradigm more generally) has celebrated the individual expressing "herself" (or perhaps I should say "himself"), jazz has from its beginning been seen as a fundamentally communal exercise. One becomes part of the jazz community first by learning its idioms. Put in very practical terms, the beginner musician often learns the solos of Charlie Parker or Bill Evans in order to understand what they are *doing* so that they can go on to do "something like it." As with any kind of *phronesis*, it is always much more "caught" than "taught." Learning to play notated music is *also* a kind of *phronesis* but learning to play "what is written" is much easier than being told "learn to play without having anything written down." In this sense, learning to improvise is *even more* dependent upon an oral/aural tradition than learning to play from a score. Thus, if we were to describe the kind of *phronesis* that enables one to improvise as simply a negative freedom (the freedom from outside constraints, the freedom to do what one likes), we would have a deeply distorted idea of what the communal freedom of improvisation really is.

Communal freedom is what we *give* to each other. As a jazz pianist, I help the rest of the players in my group do what *they* do in such a way that it becomes something that *we* do together. Much of the work of a pianist (who is part of the rhythm section along with the bass and drums) is to lay down a *cantus firmus* for the rest of the players, to provide a framework within which they can play. Improvising in jazz always involves some rules (no matter how "free" such an improvisation might be), but those rules are not designed to inhibit anyone's freedom; rather, they exist to make that freedom *possible*. As a community, we agree to "play by the rules" in order to make music – which

is both a product and an activity. Yet the kind of improvisational *phronesis* I have in mind here is *not* something that is specialized and limited to those people who qualify as "musical." *Everyone* is musical and so everyone can participate in musicality. The ability to listen with sensitivity and to dance is also a kind of musical *phronesis* that connects us to all the other members of the community. While various members of the community may have particular roles (as the players of specific and differing instruments or taking the "lead" vocal), the *beauty* of the music being made is deeply connected to the kind of community that is being formed.

In such an account, the idea of "beauty" as disconnected from ethics is unthinkable. If "beauty" comes at the expense of suppression of others, then it is, in reality, *ugly*. To be sure, this way of thinking about beauty is somewhat foreign to the kind of thinking that can easily separate the world into artistic, economic, political, and religious realms. Yet I have attempted to argue here that such a way of thinking is shallow and disconnected from lived reality. Put a different way, such thinking is really only possible for those who are economically and politically privileged. The difficulty for white, cisgender, wealthy males is that it is hard for them to see their privilege and so hard to understand that *their* ways of thinking about the world are not shared by people of color, the LGBTQ+ community, and those who are impoverished. In comparison, the latter groups do not have the *luxury* of separating their artistic activity from their day-to-day lives. Or, rather, thinking that such a separation is either possible or desirable.

In a previous section of this chapter, I argued that the composer had the lion's share of the power of the musical activity in the classical music world. While I think that point remains true, there is a little more that needs to be said about the ethics and "politics" of that world. Put simply, the classical music world has *always* been about upholding the values of the bourgeoisie. As much as composers have been seen as "progressive," the reality is that their freedom has always been limited by those in political power. Composers are expected to present pieces of music that "uphold" the values of society in general. Operas may feature "free-thinking" women, but they generally come to a bad end (*Carmen* being a typical example of showing how women who dare to step out of line end up doomed). Upholding a certain kind of order and decorum is expected. Most classical composers have been subsidized by those in power in one way or another: for Haydn, it was working Prince Esterházy; for contemporary composers, it is usually a post at a university. In other words, the idea that classical composers are and have been free to do "whatever" they wished is sheer nonsense. John Cage may be "free" to write a piece (4'33") that "supposedly" subverts the system but only because the system is not actually being subverted but celebrated. His "instructions" to performers that say in effect "improvise here" are no different from scores that say, in effect, "play these notes."

What makes jazz – and other improvised artistic practices – subversive is that they are improvisational through and through. What I mean by "improvisational practices" are ones in which elements are available, but in which we have many choices in terms of how we put them together ourselves. Human life is fundamentally improvisational: we are always improvising along the way. How one chooses to clothe oneself, to conduct ourselves with others, and the kinds of roles we play in everyday life are all improvisational choices. Similarly, the whole idea behind jazz is not just to improvise on jazz standards but to improvise on jazz *itself*. One begins improvising by learning the rules and how previous players have improvised within them. But simply knowing that would merely make one a "performer" of jazz. Unfortunately, one can find this kind of "fidelity" in Wynton Marsalis's Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, in which (using a quote from Marsalis about the performance of classical music): "[T]he best thing you can do is not mess it up" (Buschel 1987: 195). While no jazz improviser wants to "mess it up," not messing up is a very low standard – it is a long way from "the best thing you can do" in improvisation. Indeed, messing up is almost a given in improvisation. Whereas classical music performance is ultimately judged on the basis of "perfection" (playing the written notes perfectly),[18] mere perfection in repetition is viewed as

a failure in an improvisatory practice, be that oral or visual. Respecting tradition is done not by copying, but by variation and enlargement.

Yet, if variation is central to the very structure of improvisation, then that goal turns out to be both an aesthetic and an ethical goal. The *beauty* of something improvised is very deeply tied to its being *improvised* rather than merely *repeated*. Earlier, we said that improvisation is fabricating something on the basis of what is on hand or whatever is available. One *could* say that performance does this but only in a very limited way. In a truly improvisational practice, the goal is putting whatever is on hand together in a way that is not fully expected, that has not quite been envisioned in such a way before. Notice just how "vague" such a goal sounds! "Put things together in a new way" is not a very clear instruction for beginner improvisers, which is why they usually start by copying what others have done. But that very copying is *not* the *telos* of their activity. Instead, the *telos* is to move beyond sheer *imitatio* to an *imitatio* that moves further and further away from the original.

When a discourse *invites* one to engage in something that goes beyond sheer repetition, one is being invited to join in a communal freedom in which *everyone* has room for freedom. The beauty of the activity is *dependent* upon that freedom. In such a case, aesthetics and ethics are closely intertwined – one can only *define* something as aesthetically valuable if it is the result of and promotes the values of communal freedom. As we saw in our analysis of classical music, there *is* a kind of ethics at work there. However, it is very similar to an Aristotelian sort of ethics, in which wealthy males rule over others who are, in one way or another, "inferior." The order of things is top down. Improvisational discourses, however, allow for an ordering that can be disordered. In the process of improvisation, one of the voices can "take the lead" and the others may follow. Yet, since the practice is inherently improvisational, someone else in the group can "take the lead" next. The balance of "power" in an improvisational group cannot be simply decided in advance; it can change precisely through the act of improvising. Thus, improvisation highlights an essential and basic aspect of freedom – that of communality. Even a solo improvisation highlights the commonality inherent to all human practices. In this sense, the beauty of improvisation is, indeed, radically political.

Notes

1 Aristotle (1984b: I: 1253a). The term "*anthropos*" can be translated as "human being" if we are attempting to use inclusive language, but the word is most likely specifically *male* in nature. Scholars have generally agreed that its meaning (composed of "*anér*" + "*ops*") is "someone who is male gendered and looks like a man." However, there is disagreement concerning both the meaning and the etymology. To be sure, the terminology Aristotle uses is standard Greek. Yet the "maleness" of the terminology is important in understanding Aristotle's conception of the "place" of males vs. females and slaves in the *polis*. That conception of place is central to this chapter. Still, throughout the chapter, I will be speaking of "human beings" rather than "man," except when such terminology is used to make a particular point.
2 Aristotle (1984b: I: 1253a).
3 For a survey of various views on the subject of the "priority" of language over music (and vice versa), see van der Schyff (2013). Also see Bertinetto (2017); Blacking (1974); Brown (2000).
4 See, for instance Benson (2016).
5 One might use as a counterexample someone who was raised by wolves to argue that we are not *always* part of a *polis*. The difficulty with such an argumentative strategy is that its very nature is so highly unusual that it merely points to the truth of what Aristotle assumes: namely, virtually all of us are part of a *polis*.
6 Aristotle (1984b: 1253a).
7 *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.), s.v. "politics."
8 Aristotle (1984b: 1253a).

9 In Aristotle's view, women are inherently inferior to men. One might try (as do some feminists) to argue that women are only inferior due to their inability (given the power structures of society) to fully actualize themselves and are, therefore, not "essentially" but "practically" inferior. While I am inclined to agree with such an interpretation of Aristotle, the fact remains that – given the parameters of the society of ancient Athens – women were simply not able to be "actualized" in the sense that free male citizens were. One obvious reason for that was that they were not allowed to be formally educated. But there would have been many other societal reasons for their lack of actualization.
10 Aristotle (1984a: 1122a 25–6).
11 On this point, see Cooper (2012: 72).
12 *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (11th ed.), s.v. "improvise" and *The Oxford English Dictionary* (2nd ed.), s.v. "create."
13 For more on this point, see Bernasconi (1989).
14 Aristotle (1984a: VI.5.1140b).
15 I have argued against any strong sense of "spontaneity" in improvisation in various places, including the chapter titled "Improvisation" in Benson (2020).
16 I have provided an extensive discussion of and argument for this point in Benson (2006).
17 One can find arguments for supporting this view in Sennett (2009) and Preston (2013).
18 I have made the point elsewhere that virtually all classical music competitions are won not by the candidates who give the most "interesting" performance (which depends on a somewhat subjective judgment) but the ones who give the most mechanically "perfect" performance. It comes as no surprise, then, that classical music's supreme value is perfection in repetition. In *any* artistic activity that is based on improvisation, mere perfection in repetition is viewed as a failure. While the ideal of improvisation is not perfection, I strongly deny that the goal is *imperfection* (as imperfectionists like Hamilton, and others, think). The point of aesthetics is that the standards of value are not established outside of the practice, but by the practice itself, as improvisation paradigmatically shows.

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19

IMPROVISATION'S ETHICAL AND EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHALLENGE

Randy Fertel

1 The Discourse of Paradigm Shifts

Improvisation – art created in the act of performance without practice or plan – seems to offer a window into the act of creation. With so much at stake, it is small wonder that we spill so much ink debating whether such activity is really, truly improvised. Is it improvised *too little* to be thought as improvised? *Too much* too be thought artistic? Or *just right*? I call these questions the Goldilocks Gambit.

Too much: "That's not writing," offered Truman Capote of Jack Kerouac, "that's just typing." For John Ciardi, Kerouac is "a high school athlete who went from Lowell, Massachusetts to Skid Row, *losing his eraser en route*" (quoted in Belgrad 1999: 239; emphasis added [R. F.]).

Too little: Jack Kerouac did, in fact, write *On the Road* in three weeks on a long scroll; it is also true that he then edited it for six years. Is the novel we read improvised enough, or must we turn to the scroll for *echt* improv, a true act of creativity?

Just right: For Beat novelist John Clellon Holmes, his friend nailed it:

> The words are no longer words but had become things. Somehow an open circuit of feeling had been established between his awareness and its object of the moment, and the result was as startling as being trapped in another man's eyes.
>
> *(quoted in Cunnell 2007: 36)*

Is Kerouac pulling something over on us?

The answer is yes, but not in a pejorative sense: the gesture of spontaneous composition is rhetorical, a persuasive device. Truly improvised or not, a work of art that insists explicitly or implicitly through its form or style that it is "improvised" challenges the studied mastery of virtuosity and the analytic rationality that underpins it. Inspired by the muse or the unconscious (or any number of related tropes),[1] formally rough-hewn or formless (or apparently so),[2] the gesture of spontaneous composition is a challenge. Improvisation is not only an aesthetic challenge to virtuosity but an ethical and epistemological challenge to the entire edifice of authority that underpins the dominant, conventional mainstream: how we judge value and how we know the world.

Splitting hairs about "improvisation's" origin – how much or little was composed on the fly – we are likely to miss the claim's impact. (I will henceforth dispense with the scare quotes.) The Goldilocks Gambit usually short-circuits the effort to examine improvisation critically, to

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understand it on its thematic and formal terms. Ernst Cassirer once said that a philosophic concept is "rather a problem than a solution of a problem – and the full significance of this problem cannot be understood so long as it is still in its first implicit state" (Cassirer 1970: 195). Spontaneity is such a concept. Often presented as a solution (this idea/text is valid/good/artistic because unmediated, the result of inspiration or some other nonrational means), in fact, claims of spontaneous composition often signal a problem an artist is trying to solve. Is care and craft, logic, and rationality the only way to know the world? Or, par contra, if this work is inspired, who is doing the inspiring? Is s/he or it trustworthy?

All this talk of spontaneity, immediacy, and visionary experience might bring to mind the Romantic period – Wordsworth's "spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings […]" or the opium-eaters Coleridge and De Quincey – or, in the early 20th century, Yeats's automatic writing or the Dadaists' Exquisite Corpse. But improvisation is a perennial mode of discourse that, while hidden in plain sight, has played a powerful role in Western culture since Antiquity. Seeing improvisers as inhabiting a recurrent conceptual space makes nonsense of our tendency to understand history in terms of distinct periods. This chapter will not confine itself to period silos. While my emphasis is on literary improvisation, neither will I confine myself to artistic silos (e.g., literature, plastic arts, theatre, or music). Improvisation's challenge to the rationalistic is timeless. The problems improvisations address differ from period to period; nonetheless, the problems addressed from epoch to epoch are isomorphic, always a matter of Reason's limits.

Seeking to challenge and expand the way that we know the world, improvisation – with great consistency since Antiquity – has been the discourse of paradigm shifts. Its *bête noire* is systematic rationality or logic. (Kerouac's *bête noire* is post-war American conformism, rooted in the capitalist system.) Improvisation promises immediacy – here, now – and its cousin, freedom from mediation: anything that might distort or blind us to the world. Note that this freedom from mediation is exactly what John Clellon Holmes celebrates in his fellow Beat: Kerouac has a direct, visionary experience of the world, as do his readers through his eyes; the object of his awareness is melded with his "circuit of feeling": i.e., the object is known not rationally but subjectively.

Seen from 20,000 feet, the grand arc of Western civilization always drives toward more and more rationality, logic, objectivity, the scientific method, and their fruit: technology.[3] Yet all along the way, self-styled improvisers spin in a contrary direction: what about the muse, intuition, the subconscious, the imagination, subjectivity, drugs? Much of the Western literary canon expresses our ambivalent longing for something beyond or before Reason (or, in Kerouac's case, beyond or before language). Improvisation since Antiquity has endeavored to enrich the way we know and experience the world while embodying and demonstrating how to do so.

Improvisations claim to be unlike anything you've seen or heard before. This trope is probably the main reason the links between and among improvisations have gone unnoticed, hidden in plain sight. In fact, improvisations wrestle dialogically with some form of discourse seen as more rigid, narrow, and artificial. Just as the pastoral genre is in dialogue with the city's sophistication, improvisation relies on a kind of primitivist or naturalistic argument – an argument from nature where "natural" does much of the argument's heavy lifting. The rhetoric of spontaneity equates the natural and spontaneous with the authentic and true. It challenges artifice as inauthentic.

John Stuart Mill's post-Romantic attack on the rhetoric of spontaneity in his posthumous essay "Nature" (1874) is instructive here, helping draw a finer bead on the rhetoric of spontaneity by describing its polar opposite, the rhetoric of craft and rationality.

For much of his life, Mill viewed spontaneity as a force for good. He reports in the *Autobiography* that Jeremy Bentham made him a "mere reasoning machine" and that Wordsworth's "spontaneous" lyrics saved him from the deep depression that ensued. *On Liberty* hails spontaneity as a better agent of the greatest good than Utilitarianism's quantitative rationality. Despite all that,

toward the end of his life Mill attacks the word "nature" deployed as an ethical norm and condemns the authenticating function of "spontaneity,"

> the vein of sentiment so common in the modern world (though unknown to the philosophic ancients) which exalts instinct at the expense of reason, an aberration rendered still more mischievous by the opinion commonly held in conjunction with it that every feeling or impulse which acts promptly without waiting to ask questions is an instinct. Thus, almost every variety of unreflecting and uncalculating impulse receives a kind of consecration.
>
> *(Mill 1963–1991: 10: 393)*

Mill's parenthetic appeal to the authority of the ancients, who knew better, is of course specious. Intellectual historians like Lovejoy and Boas (1965) have traced the classical roots of the primitivist and naturalist line of thinking. Even so, Mill neatly captures the imperfect reasoning behind the frame of mind that consecrates the impulsive and spontaneous:

> This reasoning, followed out consistently, would lead to the conclusion that the Deity intended, and approves, whatever human beings do; since all that they do being the consequence of some of the impulses with which their Creator must have endowed them, all must equally be considered as done in obedience to his will. […] [But] since what is done with deliberation seems more the man's act, and he is held more completely responsible for it than for what he does on impulse, the considerate part of human conduct is apt to be set down as man's share in the business and the inconsiderate as God's.
>
> *(Mill 1963–1991: 10: 392)*

Mill pinpoints the distrust of Reason and deliberation ("the considerate part of human conduct") as well as the antinomianism or Gnosticism implicit in the celebration of "spontaneous" behavior: inspired perhaps by an immanent deity, "spontaneity" sanctifies any and all individual acts. Mill, thus, foresees the notion's inherent tendency to foster a world beset by sectarian and individualist – indeed, solipsist – confusion: who is to judge anyone's spontaneity? Almost reeling back into a Benthamite, Mill sums up his position emphatically: "the ways of nature are to be conquered, not obeyed" (Mill 1963–1991: 10: 381).

Mill helps clarify what is implicit in claims of spontaneity, that at the very root, they are arguments from nature, arguments that suggest we are most ourselves and at our best when we are free of artifice and civilization. The fundamental idea is that we can get to a better life or to truth not by employing the higher faculties but rather by the lower, by our instinctual or animal natures, or by no employment at all. This is what Mill attacks, and with some reason.

"Reason" is, of course, the crucial term. For, the point is also to recognize that Mill not only appeals to but also embodies a contrary rhetoric, one that psychiatrist and cognitive neuroscientist Iain McGilchrist calls "the rhetoric of reason," which, he argues, "[m]ost people are completely and unreflectively seduced by" (McGilchrist 2012: loc. 373). Mill's rhetoric of reason is implicit in his densely reasoned, hard-nosed style. "How," he seems to be saying, "could you be of that party when being of my party means thinking as clearly, carefully, and rationally as this?" "Let us reason this out," he invites, and no sooner have we heard the invitation than we have accepted: merely reading his difficult, cautious, painstaking prose, laden with the "hooks and eyes" of logical connection ("Thus […] since […]. Since"), enlists us in his party. Mill's prose is an initiation in rationality and civilization, at least in party name. For what matters to Mill as he carries his argument forward is that we agree to join him against the "irrational" opposition. Hence his allusion to the ancients: they, he claims, the foundation of our civilization, knew better. So should we.

Thus, like those he opposes, Mill himself plays emotion-laden, rhetorical cards. But where Mill works hard to keep the emotional aspects of his prose unnoticed, improvisers highlight the passionate, irrational nature of their work. Of the two, it may be said, Mill's rhetoric of rationality has a stronger appeal to common sense. But by appealing to our uncommon senses – the unconscious, the irrational, the divine inspiring us – the rhetoric of spontaneity gets its own game started. Where Mill appeals to us by means of the clarity and dignity of his well-wrought prose, improvisers claim to say and think whatever comes to mind, and invite us, like them, to be careless and impulsive, to indulge our instinctual natures, and even to embrace the undignified.

In contrast to Mill's urbane voice, improvisers adopt a foolish or somehow marginal persona.[4] If, as Aristotle argues, the speaker's "character (*ethos*) may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (Aristotle 1941: 1329), then the improviser at first glance is disconcertingly unauthoritative. And yet s/he manages to instruct the righteous. François Rabelais presents himself as a drinker speaking to "illustrious drinkers and you, precious syphilitics." He hopes in reading we will think no more and drink as much as he did in writing:

> Yes, even though I, writing them, gave the matter no more thought than you, who were probably also drinking. I may add that in composing this masterpiece I have not spent or wasted more leisure than is required for my bodily refection – food and drink to you! Is that not the right time to commit to the page such sublime themes and such profound wisdom?
>
> *(Rabelais 1936: 5)*

Where Mill's rhetoric of care and craft relies on an overt patina of rationality, the improviser exploits a contrary rhetoric based on a patina of irrationality or the like – what Jung calls *abaissement de niveau mental* (Jung 1959: V: 850). While Mill attacks spontaneity on ethical terms, we see here that, in an improviser's hands, ethics slides easily into epistemology: "[S]uch profound wisdom."

Where Mill invites at every point recognition of the mind's mediation, Nietzsche in *Birth of Tragedy*, contemporaneous with Mill's "Nature," begins on the contrary note, insisting that direct, unmediated intuition, not intellectual perception, is his goal: "We shall have gained much for the science of aesthetics when we have succeeded in perceiving directly ('*unmittelbaren Sicherheit der Anschauung*') and not only through logical reasoning ('*nicht nur zur logischen Einsicht*'), that art derives its continuous development from the duality of the Apolline and Dionysiac" (Nietzsche 1993: loc. 617). Nietzsche overthrows rationality in favor of the experiential and phenomenological: I don't need to know the Apollonian-Dionysiac duality but to experience it (*Anschauung* means "specifically: sense intuition," (Merriam-Webster Online. s.v. *Anschauung*]).

Claiming to write without thought and without art (and "proving" it in the turbulent, often formless, fragmented, and ungrammatical texture of his prose[5]), and masked in a persona characterized by foolishness and unconventionality who, nonetheless, seeks to instruct the righteous, the improviser writes in a libertine, associative style that thumbs its nose at accepted canons of beauty and craftsmanship. The improviser's many masks are isomorphic (Fertel 2015: 81–4). Fools, naturals, madmen, clowns, libertines, amateurs, charlatans, and confidence men are all functionally one, all situated beyond civilization's pall, all placed there to provide commentary on civilization's and Reason's limits and to urge our getting beyond them. His/her foolishness disqualifies him/her from our trust and yet, in practice, gains our trust all the more.

Crucial to understanding the rhetoric of spontaneity, then, is our recognition of its dialectical opposite: the rhetoric of care, craft, and rationality. Mill certainly did not invent it. The opposition of these two rhetorics is as commonplace as deciding whether to propose an idea as either the product of careful research or, instead, as the result of the morning's shower: Eureka! The rhetoric of craft is represented not by D. H. Lawrence's "Man Thinking," who achieves "the direct utterance of the instant, whole man" (Lawrence 1977: 182), but rather, Man Having Thought:

not process but product; and a product based on authority at that ("unknown to the philosophic ancients"). It is characterized by a logical, reasoned style, articulated in the persona of the calm, reasonable man (the patriarchal gender here seems appropriate). If in Ciardi's joke Kerouac's jejune improvising is marked by losing his eraser, then the rhetoric of craftsmanship may be summed up by that great self-conscious (and self-proclaimed) craftsman Nabokov's acknowledging his dependence on them: "Spontaneous eloquence seems to me a miracle. I have rewritten – often several times – every word I have ever published. My pencils outlast their erasers" (Nabokov 1990: 4). Ever mischievous, Nabokov refuses to display his rough drafts because "Only ambitious nonentities and hearty mediocrities exhibit their rough drafts. It is like passing around samples of one's sputum"[6] (ibid.).

Take that, you Beats!

Improvising, then, is not just a kind of composition defined by someone's notion of the proper and correct timeline for composition. Claiming spontaneity sets up a conceptual field where large issues contend. The issues can have an ethical emphasis (as in Mill), or an aesthetic and epistemological emphasis (as in Nietzsche). Associating itself with the natural, improvisation expresses our ambivalent longing for unmediated experience, for incarnate freedom. We long for direct experience of reality, but know that some form of mediation – language, technology, artificial form or structure, Kantian categories, the mind's filters, etc. – are inevitable and not without value. Most improvisations challenge the authority of received rationality not in order to embrace irrationality wholeheartedly, but rather to push Reason to embrace other kinds of knowing. But however conciliatory improvisations become before they finish, they begin in confrontation.

2 The High Stakes of Improv's Play

In Erasmus's most popular work, *Moriae Encomium* or *Praise of Folly* (1509), Folly, Erasmus's stand-in, begins with such a confrontation:

> [T]here has been no lack of speechwriters who have spent sleepless nights burning the midnight oil to work out elaborate encomia of Busiris [a mythical tyrant], Phalaris [a tyrant], the quartan fever, flies, baldness, and other dangerous nuisances. From me, therefore, you will hear an extemporaneous speech, unpremeditated but all the truer for that. I say this because I wouldn't want you to think that I made it up just to show my cleverness, as ordinary speechmakers generally do. For you know that such orators even though they have labored over a speech for thirty whole years (and plagiarized some of it at that), will still swear that they dashed it off in a couple of days, or even dictated it, as a mere exercise. As for me, the method I like best of all is simply "*to blurt out whatever pops into my head*."
>
> *(Erasmus 1979: 12; emphasis in original)*

Here we enter Erasmus's carefully calculated hall of mirrors. The speechwriters to whom he refers are all false when they "swear that they dashed it off in a couple days." In fact, she claims, they labored late into the night and for thirty years to produce their mock encomia. They lie only to show off their cleverness. Meanwhile, Folly, appearing before us in the fool's cap, bells, and motley, makes exactly the same claim in her own oration: "You will hear an extemporaneous speech, unpremeditated" and, "As for me, the method I like best of all is simply 'to blurt out whatever pops into my head.'" They are falsely spontaneous; Folly and Erasmus behind her are so true. There's our dialogic binary.

A priest and then monk who, for the sake of his scholarship, received papal dispensation not to practice his vocation, Erasmus dedicated his life to purifying the Church while fending off Luther's Reformation. The target of his scholarship and theology was consistently the rigidity and

formalism of medieval traditions: the logic chopping of Schoolmen, the church authorities who, rigid followers of Aristotle and Aquinas, seemed more interested in displaying their command of logic than in using it to discover truths about the world. Ever true to the Church but always ready to attack abuses and corrupt practices, Erasmus was said to have "laid the egg that Luther hatched."

Like Montaigne, who writes his *Essays* from the country and not the sophisticated city, Erasmus's introductory epistle claims he wrote the *Encomium* while crossing the Alps on a mule. The echo of Christ's humble entry into Jerusalem is not accidental, but the gesture's first point is his freedom from pedantry. In fact, he wrote the *Encomium* in his friend Sir Thomas More's library, one of the best in Europe. Folly's speech is a tissue of erudition drawn from Erasmus's own *Adagia*, a kind of Renaissance *Bartlett's Greek and Latin Quotations*. But Erasmus's touch is light. Like Montaigne later, Erasmus writes prose that implicitly rejects the then-stylish model of Cicero's rolling, ornately rhetorical, logic-drenched periods in favor of the clipped, "more natural" Senecan or Attic style.[7] Thus, Erasmus's *Encomium* is presented not just as spontaneous in the absolute, but pointedly as dialogically *more* spontaneous, *less* artificial.

But are we meant truly to believe this opposition, especially given the careful scholarship that suffuses Folly's speech? The passage is a web of complex literary allusion and smells of the lamp (and the *Adagia*) at least as much as Folly complains her opponents' orations do. The final tag line, for example, is a quotation from the *Adagia* ("*quidquid in buccam venerit*") where he lists at least a dozen classical sources for the gesture of spontaneity. And Erasmus, of course, writes the *Encomium* not in the vernacular but in Latin, the lingua franca of refined Europe in his day. Claiming carelessness, in fact, Erasmus invites the cognoscenti to apprehend the skill and charm with which he carefully exploits the already tired topos of spontaneity. Her opponents pour new wine in old bottles; Folly does the same but polishes the decanter to the finest luster with erudite legerdemain and, by all accounts, in very fine Latin.

As with all claims of spontaneity, Folly's, while claiming to have her eyes only on experience, draws a bead on her target: scholastic discourse. The scholastics (or Schoolmen) deployed Aristotelean/Aquinian logic largely to defend Church dogma. Seen in its most favorable light, scholastic thought is known for rigorous conceptual analysis and carefully drawn distinctions. But for many in the nascent Renaissance, the Schoolmen had devolved into mere rule-mongering, hair-splitting, and logic-chopping: how many angels could fit on the point of a pin. (We get "dunce" from a leading scholiast, Duns Scotus.) Folly teaches us – indeed, kinetically forces us – by means of her clipped Senecan style, her illogical transitions, her catalogs, and her ironies and paradoxes, to accept her propositions – not on authority as the Schoolmen would have us do, but on the basis of experience. She would have us test them on our pulse. Not logical abstraction but rather quickness – meaning both speed and aliveness, embodied presence in the world – is all.

The *Encomium* is great fun, but Erasmus's deployment of the gesture of spontaneity is not mere one-upmanship nor is it just a sport. At the heart of Folly's speech, Erasmus argues for ecstasy's centrality to the Christian experience. To the reader's surprise, the value of whatever pops into one's head takes on new meaning when we realize that such impromptu inspirations are sometimes a matter of God's grace.

Here we stumble on one crux in the *Encomium*: just how ecstatic is the ecstasy this Christian humanist recommends? Is this former monk and scholar urging profligate wildness or the solipsism Mill will warn against? In his day considered even worse, is he urging an experiential inner-light theology that circumvents the authority of the apostolic Church and carries water for its opponents, Luther and Calvin? There are Renaissance scholars who would flay alive those who consider Erasmus's ecstasy in any other context than its very complex Christian theological underpinnings, anything more than a matter of rigorous Christian spiritual discipline, and well short of the antinomian theology of the Church's evangelical opponents. One must not mistake a trope for a type.

Claims of careless, unpremeditated, uninformed, uneducated, artless, or unpolished spontaneity are legion, too, in Montaigne's *Essays* – a title that, in its very name, asserts its tentative and unassuming character. The opposition between studied and artificial ornament and the simple, natural, and fortuitous, is central to Montaigne's program, embodied in his free-associative style and often underscored thematically. He employs it at the very start, in his advice "To the Reader":

> If I had written to seek the world's favor, I should have bedecked myself better, and should present myself in a studied posture. I want to be seen here in my simple, natural, ordinary fashion, without straining or artifice; for it is myself that I portray.
>
> *(Montaigne 1958: 2)*

Montaigne eschews the Ciceronian decoration ("bedecked") and "studied posture" that would convince the reader that his essays should be taken seriously. Indeed, he insists the reader "would be unreasonable to spend (his/her) leisure time on so frivolous and vain a subject" (Montaigne 1958: 2). Such gestures of self-effacement have caused the gesture of spontaneity to be dismissed as the "topos of affected modesty," or as the convention of anticipatory self-defense[8]: I'm not worth attacking because either I'm not worth your trouble or this is not my best effort.

But still we are left with Montaigne's frequent opposition of these contrary rhetorical gestures – art vs. artlessness – which refuses to be explained away:

> Is it reasonable […] that I should set forth to the world, where fashioning and art have so much credit and authority, some crude and simple products of nature, and of a feeble nature at that? Is it not making a wall without stone, or something like that, to construct books without knowledge and without art? Musical fancies are guided by art, mine by chance.
>
> *(Montaigne 1958: III.ii. 611)*[9]

Of course, the point is that, despite appearances, and despite common sense, the claim of artlessness authorizes. In the cultural mainstream, we lend authority to those forms of discourse that display craft, care, and thoughtfulness. The scholar's footnotes or the lawyer's citations earn authority by their mere presence, a message they carry over and above their authority-laden content. They say: I have researched this; I have thought long and hard, I have burnt the candle at both ends – believe me! Though himself a lawyer, Montaigne, by contrast, asks to be believed because he is "an accidental philosopher" (Montaigne 1958: II. xii. 409).

As so often with literary improvisation, Montaigne's gesture of spontaneity takes us to the heart of his project. His opposition to rhetoric here and elsewhere telegraphs a question that permeates his book and anticipates the keynote of his most seminal essay, the "Apology for Raymond Sebond" (Montaigne 1958: II. xii. 318–457). There, his subject is the impotence and vanity of unaided human Reason. Montaigne is no irrationalist, as a more careful study than can be attempted here would make clear. Nor is he the primitivist that many of the terms he privileges – natural, simple, crude – might suggest. Like many Renaissance improvisers – Erasmus, More, and Rabelais – especially, Montaigne's rhetoric of spontaneity is employed to enforce our recognition of the limits of human Reason. This recognition was central to Renaissance humanists' program. Like poet and Anglican priest John Donne, they sought "to trouble the understanding, to displace, and to discompose, and disorder the judgment" (Donne 1962: 2: 282) – traditionally, along with man's will, the highest, most Godlike faculty. While articulating with newfound pride the glories of being human in an age that discovered (or rediscovered) both classical Antiquity and the new world, their purpose was ever to remind us of man's limits and his dependence on God's grace, to warn against pride becoming hubris.

This is my central point: while usually argued away, or subjected to pointless scrutiny, the figure of spontaneous composition – the rhetoric of spontaneity – in fact, subtly channels the "spontaneous" text's central issue, whether we notice it or not – the nature and (suspect) value of rationality and by what means or by what conventionally "lower" faculty we might enlarge or improve it.

3 The Promise of Direct Unmediated Experience

So far, we have considered improvisation as an artistic discourse. But modern science, since its foundation, has shared with improvisation a longing for an unmediated experience of nature. Understanding the role of the rhetoric of spontaneity in modern science will clarify that rhetoric's epistemological challenge.

The quirky and iconoclastic books and articles of Benoit Mandelbrot, one of the founders of Chaos Science, slowed his acceptance among scientists. But this quirkiness did much to promote his deep program, an openness to the non-linear, self-organizing aspects of nature. Mandelbrot's "openness" is conveyed by his eschewing, as he says in the preface, the form of "textbook [or] treatise in mathematics" and his characterizing of *The Fractal Geometry of Nature* instead as a "case-book […] a compilation concerning actual cases linked by a common theme" and as "a scientific Essay because it is written from a personal point of view and without attempting completeness. Also, like many Essays, it tends to digressions and interruptions" (Mandelbrot 1983: 2). There's that "essay" again! All these are tropes of the rhetoric of spontaneity.

Mandelbrot discovered these self-ordering systems by taking up the challenge "to study those forms that Euclid leaves aside as being 'formless,' to investigate the morphology of the 'amorphous'" (Mandelbrot 1983: 1). His new science describes "a new world of plastic beauty" and the "family of shapes [he] call[s] fractals which makes it up" (Mandelbrot 1983: 2). In so doing, he describes the regularity of irregular and fragmented patterns. In his encyclopedic tendency, his digressions, his subjective voice, and his swerving from the traditional form, Mandelbrot participates in the line of improvisation. His eccentric voice, so offensive to mainstream scientists who long did their best to marginalize him, unwittingly looks toward the foolish persona of the improvisatory aesthetic and helps implicitly debunk the scientific method that has no room for life's complexity, aspects of nature invisible to mainstream science. Improvisation, in the voice of the marginal, the leftover, the thrown away, embraces the marginal, the leftover, the thrown away.

One need not wait for Mandelbrot to see the rhetoric of spontaneity deployed in the name of science. Francis Bacon, usually credited as the founder of the modern scientific method, anticipates his new empiricism in his Senecan-style essays. Like other Renaissance improvisers, he opposes the Schoolmen because they "hunt more for words than matter" (Bacon 1863/4, 3: 283). In *Of the Wisdom of the Ancients* (*De sapientia veterum*, 1609), he imagines Nature as the god Pan, whose spouse, the scientist, is Echo:

> For that is in fact the true [natural] philosophy which echoes most faithfully the voice of the world itself, and is written as it were from the world's own dictation; being indeed nothing else than the image and reflection of it, which it only repeats and echoes, but adds nothing of its own.
>
> *(Bacon 1863/4, 13: 101)*

This, sadly, is the shaky foundation of science's myth of rational objectivity, a neutrality that can never be achieved. One-time surrealist-turned-physicist Wolfgang Paalen eloquently describes this longing as science's "pretended Zero-point of observation […] like a chaste sword tip inserted

between perception and interpretation" (quoted in and translated by Belgrad 1999: 60). Like all claims of direct, unmediated experiences, Bacon's vaunted pure echo of nature is rhetorical. In short, Stanley Fish writes, "the 'motor' by which science moves is not verification or falsification, but persuasion" ("Rhetoric" 2010: 211).

And of course, Bacon's unmediated ventriloquism-turned-scientific method depends on the mediation inherent in the hypotheses that drive the experimental method. These hypotheses inevitably shape the voice of the nature that we hear. We see light as a particle or a wave depending on the experiment we submit light to. Bacon's immediacy will be achieved paradoxically through the mediation of experimental tools like the microscope, telescope, and air-pump, whose "aim," according to 17th-century polymath Robert Hooke's *Micrographia* (1665), "was the 'Inlargement [sic] of the dominion of the Senses'" (quoted in Shapin and Shaffer 2011: 35–36). Modern science, thus, holds this contradiction in suspension, the longing for unmediated experience and the excitement about these new technologies of mediation, not least among them, inductive, experiential, hypothesis-driven Reason.

The yearning for unmediated, objective experience is doomed to failure intrinsically by the "beholder's share" inherent in scientific hypotheses in particular and in perception in general. If we want to see accurately, we must acknowledge the bit of ourselves we contribute to what we see, the way that our perceptual lens shapes our world. "There is no innocent eye," says art historian E. H. Gombrich (Gombrich 1961). For philosopher of aesthetics Nelson Goodman,

> The eye always comes ancient to its work, obsessed by its past and by old and new insinuations of the ear, nose, tongue, fingers, heart, and brain. It functions not as an instrument self-powered and alone, but as a dutiful member of a complex and capricious organism. Not only how but what it sees is regulated by need and prejudice.
>
> *(Goodman 1968: 7 f.)*

Cognitive neuroscience has confirmed the truth that we shape experience not just by the software of prejudice and desire but also by the hardwired filters of the brain and nervous system. Nonetheless, we can't rid ourselves of our longing for unmediated experience any more than we can remove the filters or lenses that prevent it. Rather, what we must note, examine, and appreciate is the complexity of the human response to this dilemma: an innate longing that has no hope of fulfillment – no hope, even down to the level of how our brain works. While promising immediacy, great improvisations give voice to that tension and that complexity.

It is easy now to think of the system-mongering Schoolmen as strawmen hardly worthy of rebuttal. But as Stephen Toulmin explains, speaking of Erasmus and Montaigne, "[T]hey regarded human affairs in a clear-eyed, non-judgmental light that led to honest practical doubt about the value of 'theory' for human experience – whether in theology, natural philosophy, metaphysics, or ethics" (Toulmin 1990: 25). The problem is not just the kind of system scholiasts used. It is their commitment to knowing the world through theory and doctrine, not experience. What Alfred North Whitehead calls "the rationalistic orgy of the Middle Ages" (Whitehead 2011: 20) is the result of their commitment to system itself: improvisation's *bête noire*. This is the great shift humanists like Erasmus, More, Montaigne, and Rabelais affected, and they did so in part through their brilliant improvisations. If the Schoolmen hardly seem to merit such abuse (or our attention), Toulmin reminds us that their commitment to abstract theory and absolute system was revived by Descartes. Toulmin argues that Descartes's "Quest for Certainty," the foundation of modern philosophy – and which "(as [John] Dewey and [Richard] Rorty argue) lead philosophy into a dead end" – is in part a response to the religious upheaval of the Thirty Years War, and in part to Renaissance humanists, our improvisers, whose urbane and tolerant skepticism could not prevent that upheaval (Toulmin 1990: 80, 75).

Worse, the great improvisers know that the quest for unmediated experience is not just our glory but also our curse: our glory because it is the source of much of the achieved sympathy in the world; our curse because it can be used to rationalize, even be the agency of, self-centered thought and behavior. We hardly need Mill's warning against the rhetoric of spontaneity; we need only look to the recent inhabitant of the White House whose "gut tells me more sometimes than someone else's brain can ever tell me" (Rucker et al. 2018). Donald Trump stands as an unexpected dark, Bizarro-world version of improvisation that chimes with this taxonomy of improvisation to a "T" – though as if in a funhouse mirror. Donald Trump challenges objective facts and the free press; promising to drain the swamp, he challenges received norms and hierarchies – all done, like him or not, in the marginal persona similar to improvisation's fool. While for some jazz commentators, democracy finds its ultimate expression in jazz,[10] improvisation can also be deployed to challenge democracy and to invite tyranny.[11]

The great improvisations, many of which make up the Western canon,[12] are far more cautious. Self-proclaimed spontaneous writers often reveal that the quest for unmediated experience is not as easy as they at first make it seem. Nor as beneficial: improvisers are often explicit about the dangers their longing for careless spontaneity courts. We are all the Ancient Mariner: blessing water snakes with "[a] spring of love, gushed from my heart," but not before killing the albatross in a moment of equally spontaneous thoughtlessness. How can the former be his unequivocal redemption, as many readers assume, when the latter is equally spontaneous? Coleridge's opium inspired dream-vision "Kubla Khan" warns us:

> Weave a circle round him thrice,
> And close your eyes with holy dread,
> For he on honey-dew hath fed,
> And drunk the milk of Paradise.
>
> *(Coleridge 1964: 298)*

Improvisations might best finally be understood as thought experiments that explore the consequences of too much reliance on a narrow rationalism *and/or* too much reliance on a narrow irrationalism. In the end, improvisations don't throw Reason out with the bathwater. Most seek to expand Reason by also embracing other ways of knowing the world.

4 *Carpe Vitam*

Expanding the faculties by which we know the world expands the world we can know. To broaden the scope of Reason is to embrace more life, even those shapes that, according to Mandelbrot in a catalog typical of improvisation, scientists called "*grainy, hydralike, in between, pimply, pocky, ramified, seaweedy, strange, tangled, tortuous, wiggly, wispy, wrinkled,* and the like" (Mandelbrot 1983: 5; emphasis in text), which, so labeled, mainstream scientists feel free to ignore – mere noise, statistically insignificant.

Such catalogs and the impulse to encyclopedic enumeration are characteristic of improvisation. In the end, improvisation substitutes for the melancholy *carpe diem* a different imperative: *carpe vitam*, seize life. *Carpe diem*'s melancholy stems from its focus solely on life's evanescence. Yes, says the improviser, life is evanescent, but it is also fecund, a cornucopia always renewing itself. *Carpe vitam* sets as our task the goal of lovingly, subjectively knowing as much of the world we can gather with all our senses and our (non)senses (like intuition and the unconscious). Always emphatically present, improvisers invite us to fall in love with and, hence lovingly, subjectively, know the world – *all of it*. Such catalogs present themselves not as rhetorical proof that the improviser has done his homework, but that s/he simply has been awake, present to the world in its multiplicity and fecundity. Improvisation privileges alertness in the present moment.

Whitman is, here, master among improvising masters; his *Leaves of Grass*, a catalog of catalogs. Speaking for all improvisers, he writes that he "do[es] not doubt but the majesty and beauty of the world are latent in any iota of the world" (Whitman 2017: loc. 10261), then demonstrates this all-embracing vision with a catalog that breaks all the rules of good writing: "I do not doubt there is far more in trivialities, insects, vulgar persons, slaves, dwarfs, weeds, rejected refuse, than I have supposed." Here Whitman, ever the norm-breaker, breaks the rule Strunk and White in their classic *Elements of Style* will normalize as "the principle […] of parallel construction," which "requires that expressions of similar content and function should be outwardly similar. The likeness of form," they add, "enables the reader to recognize more readily the likeness of content and function" (Strunk and White 2019: loc. 718). Rather than facilitating recognition, Whitman chooses instead to disconcert (Donne: "to trouble the understanding, to displace, and to discompose, and disorder the judgment"), leaping back and forth from broad generalities ("trivialities," "vulgar persons") to the minute and concrete ("insects," "slaves," "dwarfs," "weeds"). Such catalogs should end climactically, but Whitman ends with what we could call a climactic anticlimax. "Rejected refuse" is anticlimactic in its vagueness. At the same time, it is climactic: "rejected refuse" is exactly what improvisation brings to consciousness: what has not been valued, what has been thrown away.

Comedic improv's sole and well-known rule, "*Yes, and…*," – that is, never to say no – has the same rhetorical effect. (Saying no to "I met a green-skinned alien today": "there are no aliens"; saying yes: "was her green skin dry or oily?"). Saying yes means embracing every possibility, even the impossible, and takes us beyond Reason, into the foolish or marginal. Lewis Hyde best captures the catalog's totalizing effect on the reader, arguing that "Whitman's famous catalogs […] put […] hierarchy to sleep" (Hyde 1983: 163).

As does jazz. Composer, musician, and scholar Gunther Schuller describes the "'democratization' of rhythmic values" in jazz:

> So-called weak beats (or weak parts of rhythmic units) are *not* underplayed as in "classical" music. Instead, they are brought up to the level of strong beats, and very often even emphasized *beyond* the strong beat.
>
> *(Schuller 1968: 8)*

"What a far cry from the 1–2–3–4, 1–2–3–4 of military marches!" (Schuller 1968: 10), he adds parenthetically. Schuller argues that this "'democratization' of rhythmic values" "gives an Armstrong solo that peculiar sense of inner drive and forward momentum" (Schuller 1968: 91), each note fighting for its moment in the sun. Satchmo – a nickname he earned with his huge, satchel-sized mouth – gobbles up his "wonderful world" note by note.

This theme of the all-inclusive embrace is itself transgressive, a transvaluation of traditional, received values. The scientific method works by narrow focus and seeks the statistical norm. By contrast, solving non-linear equations, Chaos Science finds meaning in every random point: every point carries new information and is, therefore, valuable. If I ask you to count by twos (2, 4, 6, …), to use Katherine Hayles's example (Hayles 1990: 6), then information does not reside in the individual integers but, as in melody, in the underlying pattern (counting by twos). Such an operation privileges predictability. In a chaotic system, on the other hand, meaning and value is found in the random and unpredictable. Analogously, to embrace all of life – the fool as much as the reasonable man, the unconscious as much as the conscious – upends received hierarchies. Stephen Dedalus, in that monumental improvisation *Ulysses*, finds "the manifestation of God" not in church or ecclesiastical ritual but in the shouts of children on a football pitch. "That is God," he tells the schoolmaster, his superior, and is fired for the heretical epiphany (Joyce 1961: 21). To appreciate the found as much as the made object, the accidental as much as the intended event, or – as the poet Wallace Stevens sums it up in his improvisation "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction" – to

find the "strange relation" in "life's nonsense" and not just in its sense, is to be "pierced" (Stevens 1997: 331 f.). Such a wounding requires a redefinition of man not as *homo faber* but rather as *homo experiens* – not man the maker, but rather man experiencing; and not man as noun but as present participle, man becoming, not being. Chaos scientist and Nobel laureate Ilya Prigogine explores that difference in *From Being to Becoming*.

Literary improvisation shares with Armstrong an "inner drive and forward momentum," as well as a penchant for collage, which makes value out of the valueless. Musicologists count some twenty or so disparate "sources" for the great "West End Blues" cadenza (Barrett 1992: 216–41). It is not a matter of Armstrong finding the nugget of gold hidden within the manure of popular songs, opera, blues, or hymns, but of his realizing that *all* manure is gold. This is an important point. To poet Charles Bernstein, "A professional poet throws nothing out except the eggshells and the coffee grounds" (Bernstein 2014), obviously spoken as someone who doesn't compost or garden. In Armstrong's great cadenza, motifs from "Washwoman Blues" are no more throwaways and no less valuable than bits from Don Jose's "Flower Song" from Bizet's *Carmen*. In Armstrong's hands, jazz improv stitches together the "real *fancy* things [he found] among the White Folks' *throw aways*" (Armstrong 1999: 16; emphasis in original). But in his hands, riffs stolen from "the big cats, Verdi and Wagner" aren't set at the top of some hierarchy (Murrow & Friendly, *Satchmo, the Great* 1957). Armstrong's quotations don't bring with them the high (or low) culture they represent in their source. Because meaning is contextual, pieces of a collage tinkered together are imported value neutral. The value is created in and by the new context established by the *bricoleur* or collagist. This is part of the meaning of Louis's flattening the definition of jazz to "anything you pat your foot to is good music" (*Satchmo the Great*): if it makes you dance it's all gold. By making more of the world accessible to an expanded rationality, improvisation urges us to dance to life's variety and fecundity.

Notes

1 For an anatomy of the tropes of spontaneous composition, see Fertel (2015: Chapter 3, 61–80).
2 For an anatomy of improvisation's formal and stylistic gestures, see Fertel (2015: Chapter 3, 84–98).
3 Why "Western"? Non-Western philosophy and literature are shot through with the same tensions between art and artlessness. A cultivated artlessness is, for example, central to much of Eastern aesthetics. See Slingerland (2014). In African art and culture, *itutu* – mystic coolness – is, in Thompson's words, the "sovereign concept" (Thompson 1984). I wish to bracket the non-West while suggesting that the conceptual field I seek to explore is essentially human and, hence, universal.
4 For an anatomy of improvisation's personae, see Fertel (2015: Chapter 3, pp. 80–3).
5 For an anatomy of the improviser's bag of stylistic conventions see Fertel (2015: 84–98).
6 Compare the story told variously of Flaubert and Oscar Wilde, both self-conscious virtuosi, that he spent a whole morning putting a comma in, and all afternoon taking it out.
7 Concerning this key Renaissance-era distinction, see Williamson (1951) and Croll (1969).
8 On the "topos of affected modesty," see Curtius (1973: 63). On the convention of anticipatory self-defense, see More (1965): "Appendix B: Vocabulary and Diction in Utopia," 4: 580.
9 Here and henceforth, I cite Montaigne's book and essay and then the page in Frame's translation (Montaigne 1958).
10 E.g., Albert Murray argues that the "jam session" is "the representative anecdote for life in the United States" (Murray 1998: 112).
11 See Fertel (2017a, "2017b, 2018).
12 See Fertel (2015) for close readings as improvisations of Milton's *Paradise Lost,* Sterne's *Tristram Shandy,* Diderot's *Le Neveu de Rameau*, Wordsworth's "Tintern Abbey," Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn,* Joyce's *Ulysses*, Jung's *Red Book*, Mann's *Dr. Faustus*, Ian McEwan's *Saturday*, and many others.

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20

STREET ART AND THE POLITICS OF IMPROVISATION

Andrea Lorenzo Baldini

1 Introduction

"I've done a thousand pieces, ten thousand tags," Spanish writer Spok once told Rafael Schacter, "and they might have a similar style but they're never the same. [T]he trained practitioner could see the infinitesimal differences that the hand must always make" (Schacter 2014: 153). With his words, Spok emphasizes the improvisational quality of graffiti, arguably the original and most radical form of street art.[1] When creating their works, in effect, street artists never bring to light something that has been fully planned in advance.

The street is a context in constant evolution: The train is moving, a passerby is approaching, or it has started raining. Under risky and uncertain circumstances, street artists are bound to make some artistically salient decisions on the spot. This condition of forced spontaneity is the primary source of those endless aesthetic variations that even similar works of street art show. But there is something more: For the peculiar social norms regulating visibility in modern cities, as we shall see, the spontaneity of street art also carries political significance. In the context of urban aesthetics, the right to improvise becomes then the object of power struggles. I call that phenomenon *the politics of improvisation*.

While aestheticians have discussed at length the role of improvisation in the musical arts, other art kinds, just like street art, have been largely ignored.[2] Moreover, in the literature, much emphasis has been placed on clarifying the aesthetic and ethical import of improvisation, but little effort has been made to examine its political implications. In this chapter, I set forth to explore the heretofore overlooked connection between improvisation and street art. I argue that street art's improvisational nature is grounded in its spontaneous uses of public spaces.

As a consequence of their spontaneity, works of street art are rough and unpolished, thus realizing a distinct *aesthetic of imperfection*. Such an aesthetic significantly contrasts with the authoritarian perfectionism that dominates the appearances of our cities, the landscapes of which are tightly controlled and carefully planned by the authorities. Such a challenge illuminates, within the context of the politics of improvisation, the extra-aesthetic significance of street art's spontaneity: By encouraging free expression, street art does not simply have the potential to enrich the aesthetics of our cities, but also to create suitable conditions for more satisfactory and joyful social lives. Section 2 argues that, by disregarding social norms of spatial controls, street artists use public spaces spontaneously. Section 3 examines how such spontaneity requires and is revealed in what I call "on-the-spot adaptations." Section 4 shows that legal works of street art are also improvisational and spontaneous. Section 5 analyzes the political implications that improvisation acquires in this urban art kind.

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2 Improvisation, Spontaneity, and Social Norms

To some, the claim that street art possesses an improvisational nature may very well sound odd. In effect, when creating examples of stencil-graffiti or yarn-bombing, street artists do a lot of preparatory work, methodically designing and realizing, in the comfort of their studios or homes, most of the features that will materially constitute the final product. Stencils are carefully drawn and cut with sharp blades in order to produce the intended patterns. Yarn-bombs are crocheted well in advance, and often with a specific installation site in mind. German art historian Blanché (2016: 47) explicitly raises this criticism against my view by suggesting that "[a]s Street Artists prepare often a lot in advance I would not call a stencil for instance 'spontaneous' Street Art."

One could also press the point further: Even other and more extemporaneous styles of street art such as tags and throw-ups usually require prolonged training to be mastered; these are practices "demanding years of endless repetition," as Chastanet (2015: 4) correctly points out. Tags, the most basic form of graffiti that constitutes the art of street signatures, hide behind their seeming simplicity a "gestural dexterity" that is "a long (and probably impossible) path for the vast majority of people" (Chastanet 2015: 3). These visual katas seem to leave little to improvisation.

And yet, these dismissals of street art's improvisational nature depend on a naïve and rather misleading understanding of what it means to improvise. In his work, Alperson (1984, 2010) offers a more articulated characterization of improvisation. He describes an improvised activity as one whose features are not fully planned beforehand. In this sense, he correctly points out that at least some of the fundamental aspects of an improvised activity *and* its product(s) are decided while performing that activity.

> In a very general sense, we can think of improvisation as a kind of goal-directed activity ('I need to find something to get this boulder out of the way') […] being done on the fly ('Maybe I can use this branch as a lever to move the rock').
>
> *(Alperson 2010: 273)*

Alperson (2010) recognizes that, according to his general characterization, most human activities are improvisational to some extent. Learning how to walk or talk, befriending someone, or defusing a bomb are all activities that depend on one's capacity to improvise. However, those actions that we single out as improvisational are characterized by a significant degree of spontaneity and freedom. Improvisation – just like tags and throw-ups – often relies on routines, rituals, and repetitions. It is not *fully* free or unrestricted. However, in activities that we consider improvisational, "freedom seems to be on display in the spontaneity of the activity" (Alperson 2010: 274).

For instance, in jazz improvisation, the freedom of creating a musical passage on the spot is on display. Of course, improvising jazz involves significant musical skills, the acquisition of which requires years of training. A jazz musician's daily study routine is, in effect, based on – among other things – repeating patterns as a way to appropriate the genre's melodic vocabulary, harmonic framework, and rhythmic patterns.[3] However, when improvising, this musical knowledge is re-combined and re-constructed in the moment, in spontaneous ways, always giving rise to new variations: This is where we hear the freedom that characterizes jazz improvisation.

But where is that freedom on display when we consider street art? The answer, as I shall argue, is: It is found in the spontaneous use of public spaces that essentially characterizes the activity of street artists. In other words, the spontaneity in appropriating those surfaces grounds the improvisational dimension of street art. Painting graffiti on the side of a train car or installing a yarn-bomb (Figure 20.1) on a piece of street furniture requires one to freely exploit those urban surfaces for creative self-expression. This, in turn, saliently relates to street art's illegality, which provides optimal conditions for street artists to cultivate their spontaneity in ways that – as we shall see in Section 4 – allow them to improvise also in legal contexts.

Figure 20.1 A patch by Lady Muck left on an already yarn-bombed bike rack by Carrie Reichardt. Photo by Carrie Reichardt.

Here, I understand spontaneity by drawing on Carl Hausman's account of creativity and novelty. Hausman argues that "spontaneity manifests itself as a disruption within the world insofar as the world is a system of determinate events and objects existing in accord with enduring patterns" (Hausman 1975: 117). In this sense, spontaneity occurs when we have discontinuities in the anticipated flow of events. A spontaneous hug, for instance, is one that breaks with one's expectations: It is one that surprises us for it happens under circumstances that contradict or baffle what was anticipated, both by the hugger and the hugged.

Arguably, spontaneity – understood as explained above – in the use of public surfaces appears central to many accounts of street art. Blanché (2016), for example, claims that street art is "self-authorized," that is, it is art created freely while ignoring external prohibitions. Similarly, for Bacharach (2015), aconsentuality is a necessary condition for an artwork to be street art. Aconsensuality is the property of being created without authorization from the property owner. In her view, street artists act freely as to how, where, and when they create their works.

I also emphasize the spontaneity that characterizes the activity of street artists when discussing what I call street art's essential "subversiveness" (Baldini 2016a and 2018). Drawing on Lopes (2009, 2014), I argue that street art is an "appreciative kind" (Baldini 2019: 318). Appreciative kinds are groups of particulars sharing a common feature or value (Lopes 2009: 17). And we appreciate a particular p_1 qua an example of a specific appreciative kind K in comparison with arbitrarily any other particular p_x in K. My view is that all works of street art are subversive. In other words, they share a particular variety of subversive value. This value is a function of street art's capacity to question the social norms that regulate the uses of public spaces.[4]

Street artists subvert acceptable uses of public spaces by using them *freely*. Here, "freely" is intended in two senses. First, street artists use public spaces "for free," that is, without charge for them or those appreciating the works. Street art, in this sense, is a "gift" to the city (Irvine 2012: 252). This, in turn, challenges the logic of profit that generally determines access to public spaces in modern cities. Using visible surfaces, in effect, generally comes at a cost: It is regulated as an

Figure 20.2 Fra32's tags on a restaurant façade. Photo courtesy of the artist.

economic transaction (Figure 20.2). I call that system of visibility *the corporate regime of visibility* (Baldini 2016b, 2018: 6 f.). By refusing to be commodities, works of street art transgress such a regime.

The second sense in which street artists use public space *freely* is more important in this context, that is, the analysis of street art's improvisational nature. The creation of, for example, a tag involves the appropriation of a visible surface in ways that are unconstrained, unplanned, and voluntary, that is, it uses public spaces spontaneously. Such spontaneity defies the rigid control that authorities and elites exercise over expressing oneself in public. The creation of a tag follows, therefore, from a self-generating desire to express oneself, disrupting the expected patterns regulating visual communication in the city. But how does this spontaneity reveal the freedom of street artists' improvisational activity? The following section looks at just this question.

3 On-the-Spot Adaptations and Urban Performances

The spontaneity characterizing street artists' use of public spaces transforms their deeds into forms of improvised urban performances for the following reason: It puts those artists in the position of making decisions about some fundamental features of their works on the fly. In effect, in spite of how carefully the design of a stencil-graffiti has been planned and prepared, or how rigorously a tag has been rehearsed on pieces of papers or other surfaces, transubstantiating those creative ideas into tangible particulars always requires what I call *on-the-spot adaptations* about one or more salient characteristics of the work.

In order to clarify the nature of on-the-spot adaptations, let me contrast those with what Iveson (2010) defines "tactical adaptations." Starting, arguably, from the 1970s, an increasing number of local political authorities across the globe have declared war against graffiti. In order to stop or limit graffiti writing, municipal administrations have adopted and implemented sophisticated strategies and technologies of containment and surveillance, often borrowed from the military. Graffiti writers and other street artists have responded by developing counter-tactics involving, among other things, the accumulation of geographical knowledge of the city, the development of more effective technologies of counter-surveillance, and the selection of quickly-executed styles and safer installation places (Iveson 2010: 129). Tactical adaptions, in "chess-like" (McAdam 1983: 735) fashion, aim at neutralizing a situation of potential risk before it can happen. In this sense, such counter-tactics refer to long-term shifts in *know-how* and *know-that*, which influence, in particular, the planning stages of creating a work of street art.

However, no matter how advanced and sophisticated the technologies and strategies that street artists implement are, no tactical adaptation can account for all contingencies. For instance, in tagging a wall, a writer has to decide in the moment features such as the exact location and size. Also, yarn-bombers may very well decide in the spur of the moment where to place their knits (Pompilio 2019). While doing a stencil-graffiti, a street artist chooses, on the spot, the level of accuracy of the final design. Moreover, the moment of execution is generally chosen on the fly, in reaction to extemporaneous contextual conditions. These decisions are on-the-spot adaptations.[5]

Arguably, one can observe some of the most instructive examples of on-the-spot adaptations when watching videos of graffiti writers in action. For instance, Utah's and Ether's twelve-episode series *Probation Vacation: Lost in Asia* is one of the most popular documentaries of that kind.[6] Their videos effectively convey, even to untutored viewers, the sense of suspense and the unpredictability of spontaneously using public spaces. In those videos, "the Bonnie and Clyde of Graffiti," as the American couple have been nicknamed, show very well the level of on-the-spot adaptation that their extreme actions involve (Zio 2015).

Episode 11 – Part 1 documents the work of Utah and Ether in selected Chinese cities: Shenzhen, Guangzhou, Nanjing, and Wuhan.[7] While painting a piece on a train in a yard in Shenzhen, we can see Ether speeding up the execution of his stylish work after hearing some workers speaking. A whispering voice – arguably Utah – urges the crew to move: "Let's go!" Ether exits the frame but, after a few moments, we can hear a voiceover: "One sec!" The Chicago native quickly goes back to the train car and adds just a few details with black spray-paint. Here is a plausible reconstruction of this event: After realizing that there was no imminent danger and the outline could have used a quick touch-up, he decided, on the fly, to add some details to the piece. He is deciding in the moment, then, some relevant features of the piece's design. This is a paradigmatic example of on-the-spot adaptation.

Another interesting source perspicuously documenting on-the-spots adaptations is the series "Graffiti Fail Compilation" by Daos243. These videos appropriate the popular format of presenting a sequence of actions gone wrong and apply it to graffiti writing. In this sense, they present cases where on-the-spot adaptations were unsuccessful. Just like a jazz player missing a note during an improvised solo or a dancer falling during a piece of impromptu choreography, these writers show the risks that they take in using public spaces spontaneously: This, in turn, provides evidence that street art is truly improvisational. In the opening sequence of the first video of this series, the writers are doing a piece on a train.[8] All of a sudden, an electronically distorted voice says, in Spanish: "Ey, nos salieron, nos salieron" (*Ey, they see us, they see us*) They have been spotted by security guards. From there, the two writers quickly decide to stop painting and leave the site. These actions are followed by other on-the-spot adaptations, including leaving their spray cans behind.[9]

Of course, as these examples show, street artists take risks in a sense that is literal, whereas in traditional art the risks are generally only metaphoric. Such a literality has interesting consequences: It jeopardizes the very conditions of the performance possibly continuing. However, the differences with other art practices are more of degree than kind. In other improvised art forms, it is true that adaptive failures seldom result in a performative breakdown. And yet, structurally, that is always a possibility (Butler 2010: 152). Though, for instance, in jazz improvisations, performative slips are usually reabsorbed creatively into the phrasing (Bertinetto 2016), a reiterated series of faux pas may fatally break the musical flow (Fordham 2011). Dance improvisers can suffer from injuries that can possibly end not only performances but also their artistic careers. Empirically, in street art, performative breakdowns are surely more frequent but, in this respect, there are structural similarities across different artistic practices.

By clarifying the improvisational nature of street art, the sequences from Utah's and Ether's video as well as from "The Graffiti Fail Compilation" also offer us important insights into the ontology of this art kind. They show us that works of street art are better understood as performances rather than visual artifacts of some sort. In effect, fully appreciating the spontaneity of street artists' use of public spaces and their freedom requires moving away from commonsensical views while reorienting our ontological understanding of street art: We need an ontology that can effectively capture street art's "distinct *performative aspect*" (Chackal 2016: 366).

Pre-critical ontologies, more or less explicitly endorsed by many discussants of street art, characterize works of this art kind as visual artifacts. Pictorial styles, just like graffiti or stencil-graffiti, are generally understood as artifacts similar to murals and frescoes (Gouyette 2019). Other varieties that exploit three-dimensional forms are naturally captured under labels of street sculpture. Even those styles, such as yarnbombing, breaking with traditional genres and media of Western art, are easily conceptualized in terms of object-centered ontologies: forms of craftivism. According to those views, the artwork is the physical object that is a product of the street artist's intentional actions.

Chackal (2016) laments the limitations of object-centered ontologies of street art. In discussing street art's relationship with the law, he suggests that such ontologies are ill-equipped to capture the audacity of artworks in that kind. Such a feature is often (though not exclusively) a function of the illegality of street artists' actions. In effect, using public spaces spontaneously is *de jure* forbidden in many countries. However, most actions that make a piece audacious are not directly related to the material realization of the forms of a work of street art. Audacity often depends not on creating a certain design, but rather on accessing dangerous locations (Figure 20.3). Appreciating that feature requires, therefore, an ontology that understands a work of street art "as a process rather than merely a product" (Chackal 2016: 366).

In my work, I defend a performance-centered ontology of street art (Baldini 2017: 31 f.). Drawing on Davies (2004), I argue that what we appreciate with a work of street art is not the product that is the outcome of a street artist's actions, but rather the "generative actions" whereby such an outcome was created (Baldini 2018: 18). In line with what Chackal (2016) also suggests, those actions include much more than the limited set of gestures that are performed, for instance, to tag a wall or to wrap a yarn-bomb around a pole. The performance, which I shall also call "generative performance," is not defined by the creation of some tangible object *stricto sensu*, but rather by the generative actions of a street artist *lato sensu*.

This performance-centered ontology of street art aligns well with how Banksy describes the experience and appreciation of street art, especially in comparison with those related to traditional painting. "People look at an oil painting," the elusive street artist claims, "and admire the use of brushstrokes to convey meaning. People look at a graffiti painting and admire the use of a drainpipe to gain access" (Banksy 2005: 237). With these words, Banksy arguably characterizes an example of graffiti as "a perspicuous representation" of its generative performance (Davies 2004: 117).

Figure 20.3 Fra32, *Heaven Spots in Beijing*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Of course, the outcome of such a performance – the work-product – plays a crucial role in the appreciation of street art. However, those manifest properties are not enough. In street art, "the provenance, or history of making, of artistic vehicles bear crucially upon the proper appreciation" (Davies 2005: 67) of its specimen. Manifest properties of the work-product are, if you wish, traces revealing a street artist's activity, which an appreciator can imaginatively reconstruct when encountering the work-product. And that imaginative experience is crucial, for instance, in appreciating a work of street art's audacity (Baldini 2018: 18). This understanding of the ontology of street art helps me clarify the deeper sense in which street artists use public spaces spontaneously: They do not simply appropriate visible surfaces, rather, they hijack through their movements a larger portion of the city. In the following section, I show how its performativity is crucial for understanding the improvisational nature of legal street art.

4 Legality, Improvisation, and Street Art's Aesthetics of Imperfection

At this point, one might wonder whether my discussion of street artists' spontaneous uses of public spaces allow for the existence of *legal* street art. With legal street art, I mean those works the generative actions of which do not involve any *de jure* violation of current norms regulating access to public spaces. Examples of legal street art would include, for instance, graffiti realized in Halls of Fame, murals painted during festivals, and street installations done in connection with sanctioned art projects. In most cases, the generative actions bringing about those focuses of appreciation do not violate any laws.

One way to answer this question is by just biting the bullet and accepting that legal street art does not exist. This, in turn, entails that illegality is a necessary condition for something to be street art. In the literature, Austin (2010: 34) arguably defends this position: Street art, he writes, is "produced illegally in the shared public spaces of the modern city." Among graffiti writers, this view is widespread: Prominent writers such as KATO and OKER have made clear that legal pieces are not graffiti (Brighenti 2010: 320; "EXCLUSIVE" 2018). It is easy to extend their argument as to cover all styles of street art.

However, the view denying the existence of legal street art is problematic. Many prominent scholars suggest that there are significant counterexamples to that proposal on how to demarcate street art (Brighenti 2010; Young 2014; Bacharach 2015; Chackal 2016;). By accepting illegality as a necessary condition, one would have to exclude from street art "works seen as paradigmatic" (Young 2014: 4). I also reject the idea that street art is necessarily illegal. Only judges in court, strictly speaking, can decide *de jure* whether something is illegal or not. As a result, taken seriously, this view would make judges the true and only *arbitri elegantiarum* in street art, the final decision-makers about its extension. This implication seems to me as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the view (Baldini 2018: 24).

The other possible answer is to claim that legal street art exists. However, this move calls for an explicit assessment of the relationship between this variety of street art and improvisation. In effect, at first sight, one might wonder how street artists acting legally would find themselves in that condition of forced spontaneity that grounds street art's improvisational nature. If one does not need to avoid getting caught while trespassing or committing some other violation, then on-the-spot adaptations seem uncalled for. When legally authorized, in this sense, street artists' performances seem far from improvisational and spontaneous.

It is indeed true that, when working legally, street artists need not act and react to changing conditions through on-the-spot adaptations. However, their works are still spontaneous and, therefore, improvisational, though in a qualified sense. In an interview, legendary graffiti writer Fra32 expressed some remarks that pertinently illuminate this issue. While talking about festivals and Halls of Fame, where writers usually work legally, the Italian legend turned Australian resident clearly stresses that it is possible to recognize works of writers and street artists who regularly work illegally. "The difficulty of painting in those contexts," he told me in that conversation, "has to do with keeping the spontaneity of the street. It's not easy, but kings would know how to do it."

But how are street artists able to work spontaneously even when working legally? They can do it thanks to the specific nature of street art's generative performances. In particular, their specific temporality allows those to be spontaneous and improvisational. Generative performances in street art, in effect, are constituted by temporally consecutive actions.[10] In this sense, generative actions individuating a "manifest work" (Davies 2004: 26), that is the product of the generative performance, are completed *in one take*. That is, there are no pauses, moments of detachment from the generative performance, or times for dispassionate deliberation.

In paradigmatic cases of illegal street art, the specific temporality of street art's generative performances is primarily a function of the need to execute and leave as soon as possible. However, illegal generative performances do not own a monopoly over temporal consecutiveness. It is certainly possible to bring that particular variety of temporality to bear also on generative performances of street art realized in legal contexts. And, I believe, opting for such a temporality opens up improvisational possibilities for street artists by recreating conditions of forced spontaneity that echo those experienced in the creation of illegal street art.

This variety of forced spontaneity deriving from the temporal consecutiveness of generative performances in street art resembles the one found in different Asian schools of ink painting. Limitations of their respective mediums make corrections, revisions, and modifications impossible, enforcing a type of temporality similar to that of street art. Those are paintings done in one take.

By drawing a comparison between jazz improvisation and the Japanese school of painting on parchment, legendary jazz pianist Bill Evans well captures how medium limitations connect with spontaneity: "These artists," Evans writes, "must practice a particular discipline, that of allowing the idea to express itself in communication with their hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere" (Davis 1959).

One could object that, contrary to what happens with ink painting, a street artist could actually return at a later moment to complete a work. This, in turn, would violate the temporal consecutiveness of street art's performances. I cannot fully address this ontological concern here. In brief, I do not believe that a street artist can return to complete a work within the same performance. This option has several advantages, including sidestepping Davies' well-known difficulty of specifying the limits of generative performances (Matravers 2005). The visual continuity between two (or more) work-products may give rise to a new whole that one would like to count as *a* work. However, the two (or more) performances still maintain ontological independence. (Even the first performance constitutes a finished work that can be *per se* appreciated, though those following may require reference to the previous ones.) Consider this analogy: If today I record the first chorus of a song, tomorrow the second, and so on, the result is not *a* performance, but the recording of several juxtaposed performances – or, at best, a "virtual performance" (Davies 2003: 37) – that one may count as *a* work. Similarly, a later street art performance may give rise to *a* new work, though it was produced via multiple performances.

The lack of deliberation that is forced upon street artists as a consequence of the temporality of their performances has important consequences in terms of formal properties. As Hamilton (1990, 2000) convincingly argues, spontaneity is significantly connected to the aesthetics of imperfection. In effect, the essential "unpredictability and excitement" of improvisations generally result in a "greater incidence of 'formal imperfection'" (Hamilton 1990: 336). Formally imperfect works possess features that are irregular, unpolished, incomplete, disordered, rough, unfinished, etc. Saito (2017) shows that imperfect features can also be aesthetically rewarding insofar as they can enrich our aesthetic palette, while also vigorously stimulating our imagination. In effect, the exceptional and the deviant can engage our mind in refreshing ways.

Manifest works of street art clearly show imperfect aesthetic features. If looking closely at a piece such as the homage that Fra32 painted on a train in Italy to honor SAME, one can easily see that the outlines do not perfectly encircle the colored filling: Traces of color appear outside the black lines (Figure 20.4). In tags, the most basic and spontaneous variety of street art, color dripping is virtually inevitable. In stencil graffiti, we can see uneven fillings or excessive use of color. Examples of yarnbombing maintain that rough and uneven aspect of DIY items and are quickly deteriorated, among other things, by atmospheric agents.

Street art's aesthetics of imperfection is grounded, of course, on its paradigmatic illegality. As said above, avoiding getting caught imposes strict requirements on the temporality of generative performances, which are often rushed. However, that particular aesthetic is not necessarily limited to illegal cases of street art. While working legally, street artists can recover the temporality and spontaneity that are forced on them when violating the law. In this sense, by working illegally, they acquire cultural, emotional, expressive, psychological, and technical resources that allow them to be spontaneous in legal circumstances also. This, in turn, is instrumental in achieving that aesthetic of imperfection characterizing originally illegal street art.

The link between street art's spontaneity and its aesthetics of imperfection has been, I believe, largely overlooked. And yet, it seems key for explaining certain facts about this art kind, especially in legal contexts. Let me examine two of those facts. First, such peculiar aesthetics help us clarify the continuity between legal and illegal street art. Chackal (2016) explains it in genetic terms: Street artists working both legally and illegally bring into existence a socially and artistically unified practice. Those who only work illegally illegitimately appropriate the aesthetics of street art.

Figure 20.4 Fra32, *SAME*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Chackal is certainly correct on this point, but I think that there is more to be said. Artists without street credit – that is, those who do not have extensive experience of working illegally – lack those resources that ground street art's distinctive aesthetics of imperfection. The work of Mr. Brainwash is not inauthentic and unoriginal merely because he is a fraud. His work is dull, lifeless, and unimaginative also (and perhaps primarily) because it looks and feels so: The perceivable formal features of his work reveal his lack of spontaneity and of those talents and abilities typical of good street artists. What some graffiti writers call "funk," that is, this state of grace of being spontaneous, is something that one can acquire only by working illegally. And posers can only pretend to have it, while never being authentically funk.

Second, its peculiar aesthetics of imperfection is one of the salient features that distinguishes street art from other kinds of urban art such as authorized forms of muralism and urban installation. Examples of those art kinds, in effect, do not embrace the aesthetics of imperfection that is distinctive of street art. For instance, the perfectionist aesthetics of Andrea RAVO Mattoni's *Classicism Project* is one of the reasons why those works are not street art.[11] His reproductions of masterpieces from the history of Western art are praised for their level of detail and accuracy: They do not show signs of the formal imperfection that stems from street art's spontaneity. Though its aesthetic consequences are important, street art's improvisational nature also has important political implications. In the following section, I discuss just that.

5 Urban Spontaneity and the Politics of Improvisation

In the previous section, I emphasized the aesthetic consequences of street art's spontaneity while placing emphasis on its formal imperfection. However, there are also extra-aesthetic implications that we should consider. Some have recognized, for instance, the ethical dimension of improvisation.[12] In particular, among others, Higgins (1991: 7) suggests that improvised jazz interplay provides us with "a musical model for ethics with respect to the interaction of individual

and group." Here, I am shifting the focus on improvisation's political implications, which have been heretofore largely overlooked.

In order to understand such extra-aesthetic consequences, let me briefly introduce what I call the *politics of urban aesthetics* (Baldini 2020b). With this notion, I refer to the following phenomenon: decisions about a city's aesthetics are essentially political. This idea draws on Jacques Rancière's work on the relationship between politics and aesthetics. He argues that, in its most radical and basic sense, politics deals primarily with processes of inclusion and exclusion from the public arena. To be perceived or visible in public, for Rancière, is a condition for political participation: The beginning of politics has to do with identifying "the community that speaks" (Rancière 1999: 9).[13]

Rancière primarily uses the notion of the "distribution of the sensible" to connect politics and aesthetics while explaining processes of inclusion and exclusion (Rancière 2004). In his theory, aesthetics refers not merely to the study of the beautiful, but also to the original meaning of the discipline investigating the domain of appearances. With the "distribution of the sensible," Rancière intends – among other things – the set of social norms regulating what can be perceived in the public spaces of a given society. Groups that are excluded from expressing themselves visibly in public are *de facto* excluded from political participation. Therefore, visibility, as Brighenti (2007) shows, is essentially a political category, grounding full-fledged inclusion in the public sphere.

Cities offer contexts that are particularly sensitive to matters of political inclusion and exclusion. Not only do the majority of people live in urban areas, but those are quintessential centers of diversity.[14] City dwellers come from heterogeneous backgrounds: They differ across multiple dimensions, including ethnic and racial origin, upbringing, income, education level, religious affiliation, social habits, personal preferences and taste, and so on. The spatial proximity that urban settlements impose on their inhabitants is likely to turn such diversity into political conflict (Beall 2009).

What I have called the corporate regime of visibility is the particular distribution of the sensible regulating appearances in the city, thus also grounding processes of political inclusion and exclusion in that context. Such a regime has found a powerful ally in controlling the city landscape in the *broken-window theory* (Wilson and Kelling 1982). At is well known, according to this theory any sign of disorder is considered a violation of decorum.[15] Such violations should not appear and be present in public spaces, and, therefore, are made illegal.

Graffiti, loitering, and skateboarding have been traditional targets of policies of decorum. However, the range of forbidden activities has been growing in the last few decades. As an instructive example, consider what happened in the city of Pisa in October 2018. At that time, the City Council passed a bill censoring many behaviors in public spaces (Baldini 2020b). Actions such as sitting on the grass in green areas or occupying benches with food or beverages were labeled illegal. Even resting on the steps outside your own house could cost you a hefty fine, and – in some cases – a forty-eight-hour removal order from the urban perimeter.[16]

Critics of that bill emphasized the exclusionary nature of that piece of legislation. In their view, it was targeting specific groups that are more likely to engage in the prohibited activities: immigrants, university students, certain subgroups of the urban youth, and the urban poor. Citizens with higher disposable incomes could afford to go to bars, clubs, or other private venues in order to socially interact: In line with how I characterize the corporate regime of visibility, they can buy their access to public spaces. As scholars emphasize, the removal of underprivileged groups by means of laws promoting decorum is a global trend: "By-laws dealing with decorum [all aim], more or less implicitly, at barring the visible homeless, the poor and other marginalized social groups from the gentrified city centres" (Bergamaschi et al. 2014).

Drawing on Rancière – exclusion from visibility in public spaces is tantamount to political marginalization. However, here I want to emphasize one important aspect. The tight control that the corporate regime of visibility and its policies of decorum exercise over public spaces also has

the effect of eroding spontaneity in urban everyday interactions. Therefore, these authoritarian policies of spatial control significantly limit our possibilities for improvising in the city, in that general sense of improvisation as a "goal- directed activity […] being done on the fly" (Alperson 2010: 273) that I mentioned above.

Spontaneity is meaningfully connected to satisfactory urban lives (Jacobs 1961; Whyte 1980). As all of those who have been living in lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic well know (Baldini 2020a), there is a distinct joy that accompanies being in public. Such a positive feeling depends, among other things, on the possibility of being spontaneous: Being able to move across spaces without limitations, to interact with others at one's discretion, and to express oneself freely are just a few modalities where spontaneity can manifest itself. As I have shown, policies of decorum significantly limit those possibilities.

This power struggle over urban spontaneity is what I describe as the politics of improvisation. Street art is one among possible strategies of resistance reclaiming one's right to improvise in the city: Street artists, one might say, react against an authoritarian system of urban control turning our cities into Disney World-like environments. These are places where activities are tightly controlled, and their performance generally requires paying some kind of fee. Under those conditions, urban life "feels commercialized and homogenized, without a sense of authenticity" (Grodach and Ehrenfeucht 2016: 170). Thanks to their undiluted spontaneity, works of street art reinject, if only temporarily, some genuineness into our cities.

6 Conclusion

In a seminal article, Harvey (2008) examines the "right to the city" (Lefebvre et al. 1996; Lefebvre 2003). He suggests that such a right is not merely about one's ability to access urban resources. It is about something more profound: It is the "freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves" (Harvey 2008: 23), that is, to transform the urban landscape in ways inviting and promoting, among other things, those kinds of social relationships, lifestyles, and aesthetic values that we prefer. In this sense, my discussion here suggests that the right to the city is essentially a right to improvise (in) the city. It is the freedom to spontaneously create and re-create our urban environments and, with those, our lives.

I have discussed the improvisational nature of street art in the light of its connection with this desire to reclaim the city (Iveson 2013). My goal was to add a political region to the topography of improvisation offered in this volume and, more generally, in the literature on improvisation in the arts. Street art is improvisational insofar as it uses public spaces spontaneously. Such a spontaneity puts on display the freedom of street artists, who – with their witty designs and colorful forms – creatively purpose and re-purpose elements of urban spaces. As violations of the dominant order ruling over the aesthetics of our cities, works of street art are instances of a rebellion against authoritarian and exclusionary politics of urban control. With street art, improvisation is not just about expressive power and the pleasures of the imagination, but also about political action. Put in a formula – improvising artistically in the city is a form of resistance. Urban improvisers of the world, unite!

Notes

1 For a discussion of graffiti as street art, see Baldini (2018: 9 f.).
2 Works that have discussed improvisation in contexts other than music include Carter (2000); Gilmour (2000); MacKenzie (2000); Sawyer (2000).
3 Legendary among students and performers of jazz is John Coltrane's fascination with the patterns found in Slonimsky (1947), which the saxophonist would constantly practice. This fact of Coltrane's biography is confirmed in Kostelanetz and Slonimsky (1990: 466).

4 For a useful discussion of social norms, see Bicchieri (2006).
5 In the scholarly literature, improvisation is often discussed in terms of adaption as well as exaptation to unforeseen situations. See, for instance, Bertinetto (2018).
6 http://thegrifters.org/category/probation-vacation/ (accessed June 16, 2020).
7 http://thegrifters.org/utah-ether-probation-vacation-lost-asia-episode-11-china-part-1/ (accessed June 16, 2020).
8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GehfFyPU-e8 (accessed 16 June, 2020).
9 Leaving the cans behind shows a potential interaction between tactical and on-the-spot adaptations. Writers usually wipe their spray cans before painting in order to remove fingerprints and then use latex gloves while doing graffiti. These tactical adaptations allow them to prevent the police from collecting criminal evidence in case they have to ditch their cans as an on-the-spot adaptation.
10 Here, I am *not* claiming that temporal consecutiveness is a necessary or sufficient condition for improvisation. My claim is restricted to street art, whose improvisational possibilities are unleashed by such a temporality.
11 http://www.ravo.art (accessed June 16, 2020).
12 Section II of this volume is dedicated to the discussion of the relationship between improvisation in the arts and ethics.
13 Here, following Rancière, I concentrate on the visual domain. This does not imply that other perceptual domains are irrelevant. For informative discussions on this issue see Mullane (2010); Wolfe (2006).
14 In 2018, 55% of the global population lived in cities. According to projections, this percentage will rise to 66% by 2050. See https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/2018-revision-of-world-urbanization-prospects.html (accessed June 16, 2020).
15 Aristotle's *The Nicomachean Ethics* and *Rhetoric* arguably offers the first discussion of decorum and cognate notions. Other important accounts deserving mention include Bourdieu (1984); Castiglione (1967); Schiller (2004). For a sympathetic recent analysis on this theme, see Naukkarinen (2014).
16 https://www.comune.pisa.it/it/default/24253/Ordinanza-antidegrado-e-antialcol-i-perimetri-delle-aree-di-applicazione.html (accessed June 16, 2020).

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21

IMPROVISATION AND POLITICAL EMANCIPATION

Matthieu Saladin

This chapter aims to look into the potential political emancipation that the practice of artistic improvisation can bring about. It is focused on studying one example: the improvisation workshops given by percussionist John Stevens from the end of the 1960s, in parallel to his involvement in the Spontaneous Music Ensemble (SME). The SME was among the first groups of free improvisation in Europe. It was formed in 1966, on the initiative of Paul Rutherford, John Stevens and Trevor Watts, at a time when these musicians had taken up a residency at the Little Theatre Club, a significant meeting point for the development of free improvisation in Britain. This venue, fundamental to the history of the SME, rapidly became, thanks to Stevens' work, a veritable crossroads for British emerging free improvisation, welcoming many musicians who were passing through, as well as any individual wishing to expose themselves to the experience of improvisation. However, my subject is not so much the SME as Stevens' teaching, its realization within a collective that was ephemeral both inasmuch as it was constituted of the constantly changing members of the workshops but also in its limitations once the improvisation space was moved out of the protected workshop area and onto the public stage.

1 Being Open to Absolutely Anyone and the Syllogism of Emancipation

The fundamental principle of the workshops organized by Stevens was that they were open to anyone. This of course meant that people from very diverse backgrounds and with very diverse aims would attend. Stevens took great care to adapt the proposed exercises to ensure that they could be performed by *absolutely anyone*. They had to be devised so as not to require any particular talent and allow anyone to take part in collective playing. Take the exercise *Sustain*, for example, which consists of holding a note as long as possible (the length of a breath). Here Stevens explained:

> So that is simple enough for anyone to do. And that includes people using penny whistles, or if they have no instruments, their voices. Another thing that I see as important, in relation to working with groups of people, is staying in touch with the whole group of people all the time. […] And the way I would set up something would always be in direct relationship with that person feeling comfortable. That's a priority. So the method, or process, that you are teaching has to be simple enough to communicate easily to the group as a whole, and for all of them to be able to do it. But it also has to be demanding enough of concentration to satisfy those who are more developed musicians.
>
> *(Stevens in Bailey 1992: 119)*

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This consideration underpins a particular take on emancipation, consisting of making the equality of individuals a sort of *a priori* to emancipation and then testing this *a priori* through musical practice. As Jacques Rancière states: "Equality is not given, nor is it claimed; it is practiced, it is *verified*" (Rancière 1991: 163). Equality is not a goal to be attained. Rather than an initial position taken up, it constitutes a basis on which to build in practice: "Never would equality exist except in its verification and at the price of being verified always and everywhere" (Rancière 1991: 138). And it's this process of verification, which, according to Rancière, characterizes emancipation in the manner of a syllogism: the major premise lies in the presupposition of equality and its minor premise in any reality that contradicts this (for example the presumed inability of some to enter into a musical activity). The conclusion then consists of tuning the minor premise to the major through a process of practical verification, in other words, transforming it through action (Rancière 2004: 86 ff.).

While Stevens' workshops were dedicated to improvisation, their goal would seem, from this point of view, to go beyond the simple act of improvisation. It was a question, more profoundly, of *encouraging* people, by means of and thanks to free improvisation, to take part in some sort of musical activity, whatever form it might take. Thus, in the introduction to *Search & Reflect*, a collection of the musical exercises developed within the framework of these workshops, Stevens writes:

> Our aim is to encourage more people to actively participate in music-making. Our workshop pieces are therefore designed to cater as much for the musically inexperienced as for those who have already developed skills in the area. Since they are meant for mixed-ability groups, most of the pieces do not assume any previous musical knowledge or training. The main requirement is to have an open-minded enthusiasm for music.
>
> *(Stevens 1985)*

However, the workshops also provided a space in which to question and reconsider the playing habits and, even, preconceptions that participants may have with respect to musical practice and collective creativity. Through this encouragement and the calling into question of prior knowledge with respect to improvisation, Stevens sought to instill a minimum level of confidence in people so that they could play their own music and develop their own practice independently without it necessarily being linked to Stevens' own aesthetics. As Bailey summarized:

> Most teaching concerns itself with transmitting a type of proficiency, with imparting a skill, technical ability or know-how. The aim of teaching usually is to show people how to do something. What Stevens aims at, it seems to me, is to instill in the people he works with enough confidence to try and attempt what they want to do *before* they know how to do it. Encouraging them to work empirically, and trusting that they will then learn, with some guidance, from the attempted playing experience.
>
> *(Stevens in Bailey 1992: 121)*

There's nothing unique in such an approach to teaching improvisation, however. It's also used by other musicians in the field of free improvisation who organize group workshops. For example, in connection with the improvisation lessons he gives at the Haarlem conservatoire in the Netherlands, the percussionist Han Bennink underlines, in similar terms to those used by Stevens, how much his role as a teacher mainly consists of giving confidence to his students so that they develop their own path:

> Many of them improvise anyway, you see. Some play the blues or something. Always a borrowed music. Narrow. We try and introduce a broader scale of improvising – as broad as

> daily life. We are teaching them to make music out of their own background, not someone else's background. Learning what you are. In my eyes that's all you can do. Let people find out what they are and where they are and where their musical influences and preferences come from. Teach them to explore their own background.
>
> *(Bennink in Bailey 1992: 123)*

Like the precept developed by the group AMM in the late 1960s as a vector to guide their approach to freely improvised music, these courses and workshops are, in a way, a means of guiding participants towards the path of "self-invention" (Prévost 1995). But unlike AMM, where this "invention" remained confined within the established group, in their teaching, Stevens and Bennink are primarily concerned with generating this connection in others. It's about getting other people to call into question how they usually do things and develop their own practice.

Giving encouragement and support in gaining self-confidence, as recommended by Stevens to, enable anyone to pursue their own intellectual and artistic path bears comparison with the emancipatory ambition of the teaching practiced a century and a half earlier by the man behind the "Universal Teaching Method" – Joseph Jacotot. A certain number of parallels exist between the two approaches and in order to understand what was going on in the improvisation workshops led by Stevens it may help to look back at the method of the "ignorant master," whose raising out of oblivion in the mid-1980s Rancière partly contributed to, with the publication of his eponymous book.

In 1818 Jacotot, a lecturer in French literature at Louvain University, experienced an intellectual adventure that would profoundly affect the rest of his life. Faced with a class of Dutch students whose language he did not know, he succeeded in teaching them French simply by giving them a bilingual edition of *Télémaque* to read. From this experience, Jacotot drew the following conclusion, on which he based all of his subsequent teaching: a teacher shouldn't aim to teach what he knows to his students, as they are perfectly able to learn this by themselves, rather what they need is confidence in themselves to venture into the world of knowledge. Teachers are only there to help students check their knowledge and their ability to learn and support them in their task (Rancière 1991: 7 f.). This means that one unversed person is perfectly able to teach another, since teaching isn't about giving explanations but about emancipation.

The principle behind this intellectual emancipation is the same as the one at work in Stevens' workshops. It simply consists of the assumption of equal intelligence. Thus, in the foreword to the first edition of his "*Enseignement universel*" (or "Universal Teaching Method"), Jacotot stipulates clearly that "all men are of equal intelligence" (Jacotot 1834). This isn't the same as saying, as Rancière tells us, that all manifestations of intelligence have the same value, nor even that behind this affirmation was concealed a mistaken apology for spontaneous and unlimited knowledge. It only means that the process is the same for anyone. This Jacotist assumption is shared by Stevens, right down to how he might organize his workshops. Without having read Jacotot's treatises, the percussionist would assume that anyone can improvise.[1] Commenting on Stevens' approach, Maggie Nicols – a member of the SME for a period of time and someone who led workshops based on the method developed by the percussionist – recalled: "[Stevens] believed everyone was creative." Highlighting the political nature of such an assumption, she added: "At a seminar, John said, 'What we are doing is practicing an alternative society'. That's absolutely what John was about, music as social relationships" (Nicols in Cowley 2002: 35).[2]

This encouragement to play meant that considering there to be a clear separation between those able to take part in musical activity, through a social context that predisposed them to do so and, thus, claiming a certain legitimacy in doing so, and those who feel excluded was no longer *à propos*. It was more a question, as Evan Parker reports, of working towards "the removal of barriers between musicians and listeners" (Parker in Schouwburg 2007: 16), of calling into question,

via the workshops, the distinction between legitimate musicians and unsanctioned individuals to claim the right to musical practice. Highlighting the political dimension of Stevens' approach, Christopher Small observes:

> […] for the message is not only simple and revolutionary but it is also alarming to those who hold our society's musical purse strings; once people become aware that music is in themselves and not only in those who have been selected to become musicians, once they take back to themselves the musical act in a spirit of delight and self-affirmation, who knows what else they might insist on reclaiming, and enjoying, of what has been taken from them.
>
> *(Small in Stevens 1985)*

We can observe here that the remarks made by Small are not unlike those uttered two millennia earlier by Plato in the third book of *Laws*, in which, through the words of the stranger from Athens, the philosopher extrapolates on the political consequences of musicians allowing themselves to stop respecting the ancestral laws of the Muses, instead preferring to play their own music. Unlike Small, the philosopher does not, however, advocate "self-affirmation," but rather condemns it firmly, in order to caution Megillus and Cleinias against the social outbursts and the political aimlessness to which a democracy inevitably leads (Plato (700e–701b) 2006: 68).

While the political dimension of Stevens' approach, at least as presented by Small, seems to speak for itself, it should be pointed out that no claim going beyond the musical sphere in this way ever appears as clearly as this in the remarks made by the percussionist. Unlike other improvisers of the same era, such as members of Musica Elettronica Viva (MEV) or some of those involved with the London Scratch Orchestra, who clearly displayed a more political agenda, Stevens explicitly seemed to want to limit his field of action and the implications of his practice solely to musical practice.

2 Emancipation and the Three "Rules" of Improvisation

Nevertheless, it still holds that if all men are of equal intelligence, they will all be able to combine this intelligence through music and this will be demonstrated through collective improvisation. However, here too we shouldn't misunderstand the issues playing out for improvisers behind this formulation. They aren't saying that all apprentice improvisers will necessarily be virtuosos – that isn't the objective of emancipatory logic – rather, they simply aim to show, through improvisation, that any individual is able to make music, and, what's more, that they are able to do so as a group. Moreover, the same rules apply in music as in painting and, indeed, in any other art. In his commentary on Jacotot's method, Rancière explains what constitutes emancipation in painting, and we can easily transpose his terms into the musical field:

> But it's not a matter of making great painters; it's a matter of making the emancipated: people capable of saying, "me too, I'm a painter," a statement that contains nothing in the way of pride, only the reasonable feeling of power that belongs to any reasonable being. "There is no pride in saying out loud: Me too, I'm a painter! Pride consists in saying softly to others: You neither, you aren't a painter." "Me too, I'm a painter" means: me too, I have a soul, I have feelings to communicate to my fellow-men.
>
> *(Rancière 1991: 66 f.)*

This logic would seem to require only one thing: a certain confidence in one's own capacities – which is what these workshops could help create. Indeed, with Stevens, as with Jacotot, the important thing is to see emancipation as the realization of confidence in oneself rather than as

an understanding of something external instilled by a teacher. The instillation of such an understanding can, after all, only reaffirm the inequality that it sets out to remove. Rancière explains: "There is stultification whenever one intelligence is subordinated to another" (Rancière 1991: 13). On the contrary, in his workshops Stevens tried to minimize his role as teacher as far as possible, so that participants would join in the proposed experience of their own accord:

> My object is to incorporate all the people in the room in an experience. A free playing experience. (Relatively free because my presence there as a "teacher" is always a bit weird.) You get them to apply themselves to this joint experience and some point arrives where we are all "doing it."
>
> *(Stevens in Bailey 1992: 121)*

Stevens wasn't there to pass on his knowledge and mastery of improvisation to the participants, but was there more to urge them to play. As such, these sessions were primarily based on the desire of the people who were there:

> What's interesting, one of the things that I see as important, is this: I've had to try and avoid a situation where they relied on me to come in and set the whole thing up. I made a rule: I said to them "You're coming here because you're supposed to want to play. This is a room in which you can play, so, as soon as you get in this room you are going to prove you want to play by getting on and playing. If you don't want to do that, none of what I'm doing here makes any sense whatsoever. If there are four or two or even if you are the first to arrive, as soon as you get here – start playing. And if someone comes who's new to the class then it's the responsibility of the people who are experienced in the class to invite the newcomer to play. In a sense, that is what it is about."
>
> *(Stevens in Bailey 1992: 121)*

This call to arms had the result of stimulating that "desire to be responsible for oneself," through which, according to Nietzsche, freedom is defined. At the end of the day, whatever encouragement is given, only this desire can lead to the process of verification of equality that is inherent in emancipation. As Rancière notes, we can certainly affirm that the barriers between those who can and those who can't do not exist, but "it is only true that they don't exist on condition that we declare ourselves able to verify this is the case […]" (Rancière 2006: 515).[3]

We can also say that this comparison between the Jacotist method and Stevens' workshops does not only relate to a certain similarity in their assumptions and their objectives, but also extends, in certain aspects, to the very way in which they link these assumptions and objectives. In the first volume of *Enseignement universel* (or Universal Teaching Method), Jacotot dedicates a whole chapter to improvisation. Of course, he wasn't talking about musical improvisation – let alone free improvisation as Stevens understands it – but rather improvisation in speech. However, despite the historical distance between the two approaches and their respective fields of application, Jacotot's contentions regarding improvisation also have similarities with that which underpins Stevens' musical teaching. After having devoted different chapters to reading, writing, language, grammar, history and even arithmetic, Jacotot begins an important chapter on improvisation. The chapter is not insignificant in terms of the overall structure of his book. It comes around halfway through and introduces the initial aspects of what the art of eloquence consists of and the areas that the following chapters will look into: eloquence from the pulpit, by the orator or at the bar, as well as at assemblies where one speaks and which deliberate on material or moral power, or, in other words, different examples of public speaking. For Jacotot, what was at stake in improvisation was also valid in the public sphere and by extension in politics: "everything is in everything," he insisted. Jacotot elaborated three rules from these lessons in improvisation that were to be followed

in order that anyone might discover how to improvise when speaking and therefore, more generally, venture further along the road to emancipation: "Learn how to overcome yourself;" "Don't allow yourself to become intimidated by any barracking;" "Start, continue and finish" (Jacotot 1834: 273, 276, 282).[4]

These three rules all comport within them the same requirement: only the person concerned can put their own emancipation into practice and, for this to take place, they need a certain level of confidence in themselves. They may hold back from doing, but they never claim that they can't do it – "Say: I don't want to do it; but don't say: I can't" (Jacotot 1834: 288).[5] As for the teacher, he or she can only encourage, or even command, those under his or her charge to get to work, just as Stevens did when asking his students to start playing as soon as they arrived in class. Above all, they were asked to play without being afraid of playing "badly." Novice musicians must play their own sounds without preconceptions. This meant that his workshop participants had to overcome their inhibitions, which is what the first rule instructs.

While the "non-improvisor" is often, as Bailey remarked, "a musician who is prevented from improvising due to the inhibitions they feel as a result of the way they have been taught to play," their inhibition may come from another source. In such cases, the encouragement given by Stevens or Jacotot aims to remove these shields. A purported personal inability to do something, which of course is also linked to one's social habitus, may in fact, according to Jacotot, be a cover for pride and a refusal to expose oneself to the judgment of others, thus adopting the appearance of shyness and humility: "This modesty is not a virtue, it is disguised pride," Jacotot tells us (Jacotot 1834: 289).[6] In improvisation, "overcoming oneself" means, first of all, abandoning pride and vanity. It means pushing the ego's demands to one side and establishing a relationship with others, at the risk of doing something foolish. In a fictional dialogue with a student, Jacotot writes as follows:

> It is above all in the beginnings that the pupil should be required to exercise boldness against himself, against his pride and his pretensions. He feels that foolishness is on his lips, wants to hold it back and is afraid of being taken for a beast and he is silent: already he has a lost day. He doesn't know how to overcome himself or doesn't dare to commit an error. How can he not fear the sarcasm of others? Reason overcomes this. Don't say: I can't bring myself to pronounce words spontaneously, without order, without follow-up, without reason: you are extremely reserved, I would tell you, in what is a game, a challenge, an exercise that your master is proposing! Is it really true that reason is holding you back? You blush, you tremble for fear of saying the wrong thing: but who said that you had to say the right thing? You promised me that you would have the courage to speak, even if you spoke badly. Nothing could be easier, you seemed to say, but when the moment comes and you stammer, is it reason or pride that is holding you back?
>
> *(Jacotot 1834: 283)*[7]

The ignorant schoolmaster continues, in order to confront the pupils with their vanity:

> Come on, don't say, 'I have not been gifted by nature'. If you don't have the courage to speak badly, you will never speak well. You will be at the mercy of the first comer for your whole life. You'll be made to look bad on the most important occasions; a play on words, a burst of laughter or hooting will make you lose your cool. If you're a slave to your vanity, you'll be a slave to everyone.
>
> *(Jacotot 1834: 284)*[8]

This is where Jacotot's second rule comes in, building directly on the first: while the improviser is called on to overcome themselves, they are also required not to allow themselves to be overwhelmed by others, either perhaps by a partner who may be playing more loudly or faster or by a

more or less generous audience. As Jacotot writes, "Fear neither applause nor censure, or you will never improvise" (Jacotot 1834: 275).[9] While these first two rules underline the necessity of the self-confidence required by the act of improvisation and, more generally, engagement in a process of emancipation, it should be clarified, beyond Jacotot's injunctive method, that the sidelining of pride in the guise of humility should not, however, according to Stevens, make way, in the framework of collective improvisation, for individualistic assurance with little concern for the ensemble. In this sense, Stevens constantly looked to articulate the encouragement to play without fearing the judgment of others within the framework of a collective process, to arrange and reconcile the gaining of confidence with the act of listening to others, in order to build a relationship conducive to group improvisation. As he explains:

> The thing that matters most in group music is the relationship between those taking part. The closer the relationship, the greater the spiritual warmth it generates, and if the musicians manage to give wholly to each other and to the situation they're in then the sound of music takes care of itself. Good and bad become simply a question of how much the musicians are giving – that's the music's form.
>
> *(Stevens in SME 1968)*

To the first two rules of having confidence in oneself is added the third – that of requiring the improviser to pursue their task and keep on producing words and sounds until the end, whatever happens. In improvisation, there's no going back. You can't play something again to correct it or play it better. Whatever has happened, has happened. As the ignorant schoolmaster says:

> To become an improviser, you must never go back on anything. You can't cross things out, delete them. The slightest delay, the slightest hesitation spoils everything. Speak badly, but never stop speaking. From the first day, you have to be in control. Whatever nonsense escapes us, it should not distract us from our objective.
>
> *(Jacotot 1834: 281)*[10]

By means of these three rules of improvisation ("Learn how to overcome yourself;" "Don't allow yourself to become intimidated by any barracking;" "Start, continue and finish"), Jacotot arrived at certain key principles to guide individual emancipation: if intellectual emancipation consists of verifying equality in practice, improvisation in discourse will help produce the necessary confidence in oneself that enables this to take place. In the same way, if the musical emancipation called for by Stevens consists of moving towards self-invention and playing one's own music, free improvisation will further its implementation, both through the exhortation to personal practice, which it instills, and the freeing from preconceptions – in particular with regard to one's own incapacity – that it entails. The ignorant schoolmaster or the playing partner can only accompany the action undertaken, like sidemen.

3 From Workshops to Big Ensembles

Stevens' workshops were occasionally transformed into large, on-stage ensembles. Some of these concerts even went as far as to invite the public to participate in the improvisation in progress. It was always about engaging individuals on the path of musical activity and collective creation, in a way that went beyond mere momentary participation:

> I remember once in the Little Theatre Club suggesting to the audience that if they wanted to take part there was something they could do in relation to us that was simple and which

> would create a collective experience within the club. And they did it – and it was a nice experience and some of them, because of hearing us play and because of that experience, started taking up instruments. Their approach to taking up instruments was based on their having listened to us and the way we were playing our instruments so that was the beginning.
>
> *(Stevens in Bailey 1992: 119)*

These live experiences involving, as the case may be, both members of the workshops and the audience, were a direct result of Stevens' desire to experiment with collective improvisation on a larger scale. This interest came to full fruition in the early 1970s, with the Spontaneous Music Orchestra (an extension of the SME) and the Free Space, which could accommodate up to thirty participants, mainly from the workshops. The principle of these concerts was the same as the workshops, though they took on a different form. SMO performances were, in a certain way, still SME concerts. The members of the group that was constituted were still distinguishable from those of the workshops. So the participants of the workshops – as well as the audience, sometimes – would only "gradually" join in with the performance and had to follow certain organizational constraints. They took part more in the manner of a "graft" onto the hard core of the improvisation formation, which had been bonded through experience over a long period. As evidenced by the title of the first published recording of this grand ensemble formation: *SME+ = SMO* (SME/O 1975). The members of the SME would form a core *out of which* the big ensemble collective improvisation could develop. Stevens tells us how the process took place:

> We'd include people who started out as the audience, both young musicians and other people who would sing sustained and play gongs or shake bells. The idea was to have at the centre a fairly developed group improvisation between say, Trevor and I (because we'd been associated together for such a long time). Then there were young musicians who had just joined in and who were interested. They were playing on instruments, but playing sustained long melody lines or sustained notes that would be moving on in a natural sympathy with the improvisation that was going on in the middle. The next rank out would be people who weren't playing but just wanted to take part – audience type people who would be singing and playing gongs. Then there would be the audience. It was intended that as people became more and more involved and stayed with it, they would gradually join the centre to expand the group improvisation. Also, on gigs we always tried to get audience participation to attract another layer of people to the outside, and we succeeded in doing it. The idea was to make the whole environment into an environment of active relationships.
>
> *(Stevens in SMO 1970)*

Such a process resembles the amplification phenomenon that Frederic Rzewski describes in connection with similar audience inclusion experiments that he carried out at the same time with MEV (Rzewski 2007: 302–21). A basic core improvises and increases its size by involving an ever-increasing number of participants, so that ultimately the initial musical center no longer appears as such but is founded in the overall set-up. Unlike MEV, however, which, from the start of the performance, sought to explode the circumscribed nucleus of the musicians on stage, notably by dispersing the instruments in space, the musicians in SME favored an explicitly centrifugal process. The members of the workshops introduced into the SMO ensemble were supposed to focus on listening at first and limit their participation to maintaining long notes in "harmony" with the improvisations performed by the hard core. "Effective" improvisation only began to reach a larger circle later, with collective improvisation only then being fully achieved. Nevertheless, we can see through Stevens' account that this process wasn't so much about gradually growing through successive additions of new contributors (going from silence to sound activity),

but rather about transforming the nature of their participation during the performance: starting from a simple and partly restrictive activity (many parameters being left to the choice of the individuals), the participants were supposed to move gradually towards free participation in group improvisation. However, the approach adopted here by Stevens tended, unlike the workshops, to affirm hierarchical relationships. It prescribed where people should be positioned (only members of the audience who were playing were seen as active audience members), in other words implicitly re-enacting the inequality proscribed in the initial manifesto. We note, however, that these ambiguities are no doubt consubstantial with the singular situation of concerts. For Stevens and the members of SME, the specificity of concerts with their circumscribed temporality seemed to imply this centrifugal movement in order to "preserve" a certain "coherence" of the whole, or at least to ensure that improvisation and the listening that it requires could fully develop without falling into indistinct chaos.

In this, the workshops seemed to better convey the emancipatory movement Stevens defended inasmuch as they weren't encumbered by the demands attached (or at least conceived of as such by the musicians) to concert situations. As we have seen, the principle of centrifugal movement wasn't a big part of the dynamics of the workshops. Their configuration was constantly changing and those who were first to arrive had to start playing together without waiting for anyone, with whatever was being played developing in accordance with whoever, without distinction, was present. What's more, due to their frequency, these workshops had a different relationship to time than the concerts. The groups constituted in these workshops were organized in such a way as to ensure that they were always open to new arrivals or, conversely, departures and absences. The process of interrogating what was being shared had to be constantly reinitialized and, indeed, seemed positively to be put to the test by the flow of comings and goings of participants. In contrast to the centrifugal process of the big ensemble concerts, the specificity of the workshops required centripetal movement – this being the only way in which their principle of openness could be maintained. On this, Stevens remarked:

> The thing about workshops, or improvisation classes, is that you will have some people for, say, three weeks on the trot, and there is something developing. It's becoming almost like a group. Then, a couple of new people will come in. Now, you have to be prepared to let go of the development you have and go wherever the addition of those new people takes it. Whether they can play or not. It's got to go back to a common point.
>
> *(Stevens in Bailey 1992: 121)*

4 From Individual Emancipation to the Emancipation of Societies

While the constant reconfiguration of the workshops may have helped preserve the effectiveness of their initial objective, the possibility of experimenting with a group creation over a longer period, above and beyond individual musical emancipation, may nevertheless be a worthwhile line of enquiry. Attendance at the workshops, as Stevens points out, only lasted a few weeks, which made it difficult to form a stable working group. These workshops were, thus, more like hubs, being continuously reorganized according to the more or less short-lived desires of the participants.

It is certainly possible to imagine groups from the workshops continuing to play elsewhere and independently, but the relatively short-lived nature of participation in the workshops is no doubt also an indication of the difficulty of maintaining the life of a creative collective over the long term. As Stevens rightly observes, free improvisation hardly seems immune from the fact that bringing together a large number of people with the aim of instituting a process of group creation would seem, most of the time, to be an activity with a short shelf-life. Commenting on the large ensemble that he began, Stevens remarked: "So it fizzled out because it had the usual

human conflicts in it. But it was beautiful while it lasted" (Stevens in SMO 1970). Beyond this participatory experience, it should also be emphasized that many of the great free improvisation ensembles of this era did not survive past the enthusiasm of the 1960s.[11] If group experiences (whatever the extent of them) very often seem to have difficulties in lasting over time, it's because, in conjunction with the human conflicts noted by Stevens, maintenance of the practices of freedom and the principles of equality that initially inspire them tend to be tested over the long term. This is indeed what David Toop says when he writes about improvisation groups in the late 1960s: "Eventually, as with any experiment in collectivism, the limitations of freedom began to assert themselves. Collective relationships in which hidden dynamics are not exposed are breeding grounds for covert tyranny" (Toop 2002: 248).

While musical emancipation was alive in the workshops, it can be seen that, in the big ensembles, the process tended to enact the very thing to which it was opposed. Is this because musical emancipation is incompatible with a broader group process?

Without drawing hasty conclusions regarding the possibility of lasting, free, collective creation, we can, nevertheless, through this example, raise the question of the possibility or otherwise of the adequation of emancipation and community.

Although these workshops sought, in practice, to affirm the possibility of such a coexistence and succeeded in certain ways, the conclusion also emerges that a musical community made up of equals tends to reaffirm principles of inequality with its hierarchies and its distribution as soon as it seeks to expand quantitatively, as was the case during the large ensemble concerts. Does this mean therefore that musical emancipation is only possible on a case-by-case basis, in a close relationship between individuals or at best in a relatively small group of people? Is it not possible for the process to be rolled out at the level of a big ensemble or even society as a whole? Regarding the application of his method in institutions, Jacotot was categorical: "Universal teaching can only be directed to individuals, never to societies" (Rancière 1991: 131). The thing is that emancipation cannot survive within the pedagogical order that is habitually part of society. The enactment (practice) of emancipation can, however, lead to the principle behind it reaching a wider circle (such as the new groups that came out of the workshops). While it would hardly seem possible to transform the idea of self-invention through improvised practice into an "institution" without the risk of compromising oneself, the fact remains that the process of self-invention can contribute to the dissemination of its principle, tending incidentally to generate countless new local and dispersed centers. Wider emancipation would, therefore, seem to lie less in greater numbers belonging to a collective than in a more frequent occurrence of the phenomenon – in other words an amplification that results less in the increased size of a single source, than in the multiplicity of opportunities to engage.

Related Topics

Gartmann, T. (This Volume) "Play It Again. 30 Times Differently – Koch-Schütz-Studer and Their Tales from 30 Unintentional Nights."

Notes

1 Something that Jacotot, as we will see, also seems to be convinced of. A century and a half before Stevens, the ignorant schoolmaster was able to declare: "Thus we assume that every man has genius. We even assume that every man is a born improviser." Our translation of: "Nous supposons donc que tout homme a du génie. Nous supposons même que tout homme est improvisateur né" (Jacotot 1834: 289).

2 If this chapter is focused on free improvisation in music, we have to observe that practices of improvisation in other arts (dance and theatre, for instance) may share the same approach and ambition. See notably DeFrantz 2016; Seham 2016; Fischer-Lichte 2008.

3 My (M. S.) translation of: "elles n'existent pas à la condition que [l'on] se déclare capable de vérifier leur inexistence."
4 My (M. S.) translation of : "Apprends donc à te vaincre"; "Ne vous laissez donc jamais intimider par les cris" ; "Commencez, continuez et finissez."
5 My (M. S.) translation of: "Dites : Je ne veux pas faire ; mais ne dites pas : Je ne le puis."
6 My (M. S.) translation of: "Cette modestie n'est pas une vertu, c'est de l'orgueil travesti."
7 My (M. S.) translation of:

> C'est dans les commencements surtout que l'on doit exiger de l'élève qu'il s'exerce à l'audace contre lui-même, contre son orgueil et ses prétentions à l'esprit. Il sent que la sottise est sur ses lèvres, il veut la retenir, il craint de passer pour une bête, et il se tait : voilà déjà un jour de perdu. Il ne sait pas se vaincre, il n'ose pas faire un solécisme; comment ne craindrait-il pas les sarcasmes d'autrui ? La raison vient à bout de tout cela. Et ne dites pas: je ne saurais me résoudre à prononcer des mots en l'air, sans ordre, sans suite, sans raison : vous êtes bien réservé, vous répondrais-je ; quand il s'agit d'un jeu, d'une gageure, d'un exercice que votre maître vous propose ! Est-il donc bien vrai que ce soit la raison qui vous retienne ? Vous rougissez, vous tremblez de peur de mal dire : mais sommes nous convenus que vous diriez bien ? Vous m'aviez promis que vous auriez le courage de dire, quand même vous diriez mal. Rien n'était si facile, à vous entendre, le moment arrive et vous balbutiez : est-ce la raison ou l'orgueil qui vous retient ?

8 My (M. S.) translation of:

> Allez, ne dites pas : "Je n'ai point reçu de dispositions de la nature" ; puisque vous n'avez pas le courage de mal parler, vous ne parlerez jamais bien ; vous serez toute votre vie à la merci du premier venu ; on vous fera déraisonner dans les occasions les plus importantes ; un jeu de mot, un éclat de rire, les huées vous feront perdre la tête : puisque vous êtes l'esclave de votre vanité, vous serez l'esclave de tout le monde.

9 My (M. S.) translation of: "Ne craignez pas plus les applaudissements que les censures, ou vous n'improviserez jamais."
10 My (M. S.) translation of:

> Pour devenir improvisateur, il faut ne jamais revenir sur un mot lâché. On ne rature point, on n'efface point ici; le moindre retard, la plus légère hésitation gâtent tout ; parlez mal, mais parlez toujours : dès le premier jour, il faut être maître de soi ; quelque sottise qui nous échappe, elle ne doit point nous distraire de notre objet.

11 On this point, see, for example, the contribution by Thomas Gartmann in this volume. About politics and utopia in the European free improvisation scene during the 1960s and 1970s, see also Saladin 2014.

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PART III

Improvisation in Musical Practices

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COMPETING ONTOLOGIES OF MUSICAL IMPROVISATION

A Medieval Perspective

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The idea of improvisation, broadly defined, has been integral to our imagination of the medieval musical past. It can be related to many elements of production: to the act of un-notated creation; to the manipulation and amplification of notated materials; to our observance of rigid rules and formulae; or to spontaneous freedom. Whichever we chose, we seem happy to apportion improvisatory discourse more room within the Middle Ages than we do in nearly any other period. At least in part, this is maybe with good reason. After all, many studies have highlighted the importance of orality and memory to medieval culture, even when dealing with written materials. Within the musical sphere, improvisation advice and collections of "exempla" span the entire period: from the very earliest references to liturgical polyphony in the 9th century, to virtuosic instrumental performance in the 15th. Furthermore, some scholars have highlighted the importance of orally circulating melodic material, shared by a community of performers and listeners to style development, be that chant in monastic environments or refrains in courtly circles. Others go so far as to say that audiences may often have been unable to distinguish between the execution of improvised and notated music, challenging modern assumptions about the separation of the two activities. Of course, the fact that uncountable musical sources did not survive, and that those that did lack numerous parameters that we consider essential elements of musical notation, does not improve matters.[2] Indeed, this provided a space for retrospective interpretative and performative inputs that have more to do with the preoccupations of the time in which they are undertaken than with the point of origin of the materials studied or performed.

In what follows, we would like to pick up on the improvisatory stance as a social construct, as an ontology. We will, therefore, briefly outline the friction between, on the one hand, the experiences of current practitioners and audiences of medieval music and, on the other, those of their original counterparts. We begin with an overview of surviving evidence relating to improvisatory practices in the Middle Ages. This will be compared with the characterization of medieval musical improvisation within modern education and practice, and how these efforts interact with audience expectations and musical culture more widely. Throughout this process, questions will arise as to what it is we mean when we discuss improvisation. A parallel discussion considers improvisation from the societal point of view, as a point of engagement between performer and audience. Here we discuss the social value placed on improvisation rather than on the technical details of its execution. This structure will enable us to investigate how historical inquiry and current discourse around improvisation can constructively interact and identify where our vocabulary should be refined to better describe changing phenomena. We will come to suggest the usefulness of history in reminding us of the non-universality of our ontologies and how this in turn may

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affect a wide range of our current musical and improvisatory activities: from how we educate to how we measure, from how we analyze to how we perform.[3]

Historical Overview I: The Improvising Performer

Let us begin with a brief overview of what we know. Before going into details, however, some qualifiers must pre-empt the discussion. The term "medieval" is inherently non-specific and non-musical. It was not constructed to inform analysts of any unifying intellectual, aesthetic, linguistic, technological, or practical characteristic, and it is singularly unsuccessful in terms of musical periodization. On all these fronts, medieval culture is as heterogeneous as any other randomly selected 1000-year span of world history. Thus, the tag "medieval improvisation" is intrinsically uninformative in comparison to others that are more clearly grounded within discernible temporal and geo-political boundaries, or that consider explicitly sonic and stylistic qualifiers. While "Jazz improvisation," for example, is also a complex construct that underwent multiple transformations and elaborations of practice, as a tag, it allows an audience wanting to enjoy an evening's musical entertainment to form relatively specific and reasonable expectations.

When approaching the issue from the historical point of view, the outlook is by no means better. Here, we are inevitably bound by having to deal with what materially survives from the past – but writing in the Middle Ages was never neutral. For example, during the early Middle Ages the Church had a near monopoly over writing. This resulted in the suppression of pagan and pre-Christian notations and, more widely, of musical repertoires in which the Church was either not interested or of which it disapproved. This, of course, does not mean other music did not exist, only that it was not recorded and does not survive. But orality is a mechanism that neither necessitates nor rules out improvisation, or, to put it differently, a lack of notation does not automatically qualify the performed repertoire as improvisatory (Reichl 2012). The question that remains is: how does one discuss improvisation in an oral culture? Or more widely: how can we incorporate lost materials into our intellectual model of musical technique and practice? Similar "black-spots" persist also in the High and Late Middle Ages when musical notation had become established and subtle. Indeed, they persist throughout history to this day. Furthermore, the decision to notate may have little to do with practice. Luxurious books with musical notation were often intended not for performance but for presentation. Alden, for example, shows not only how the visual elements of such sources attracted more attention to the notes themselves, but also to the social expediency of being seen to be looking at them (Alden 2007). The greater the value and the better the quality of the material artifact, the less likely performers were given access to it. Even personal manuscripts were often more an assertion of intellectual proficiency and cultural exposure than tools for practice: they projected their owners' ability to read and write music (regardless of whether they really could), as well as their taste and repertoire knowledge.[4] As a result, any patterns emerging from our necessary reliance on surviving materials offers, at best, only a distorted mirror through which we can look at the past. Dealing with the ephemeral practice of improvisation markedly increases this danger. We must accept that our outcomes are skewed by the origins of the available materials and their position along the seam between written and unwritten production. Each artifact is the result of a specific cultural and intellectual milieu in which notation was important, and its creation often involved personal, localized agendas. Neither individual artifact nor their entire corpus was ever intended to present a complete picture of wider practice.

Our historical survey begins in the 9th century with the *Musica enchiriadis* treatise, which – like the vast majority of the specific evidence we possess – relates uniquely to religious music-making. No parallel transmission of writings about secular improvisation survives. Likely a product of the Carolingian Renaissance, this is the first medieval music treatise to address an aspect of chant

performance that does not only relate to a memorized repertoire, but includes an unwritten practice of extemporizing an accompanying voice to a pre-given melody (Erickson 1995). This practice is labeled *diaphony* or *organum* and was used to augment and beautify the monophonic chant for solemn occasions. Although this constitutes the earliest evidence of polyphonic singing in Europe, it is not treated as an innovation but as an already established practice. The *Musica enchiriadis* describes the possibility of doubling any melody at the fifth and octave, but its real focus is on the interval of the fourth, which requires a set of rules to avoid the undesired augmented fourth dissonance. In doing so, these rules create a simple two-voice texture that does not rely on parallel motion alone but includes oblique melodic movements, ultimately leading to a greater independence between the voices. However, when applied strictly, the set of rules results in a very limited number of possible solutions. This enables a group of learned insiders to perform *organum* spontaneously to any known melody. Even though the *Musica enchiriadis* introduces the first notational system of the Middle Ages that allowed to record precise pitches, its use was confined to this treatise and employed only to illustrate its teachings with notated examples, not to record a repertoire. This means that the *Musica enchiriadis*' method for extemporizing organum was developed, used, and taught within an entirely oral musical culture, without recourse or reliance on notation. This orality, and the real-time generation of previously non-existent voices, do not mask the mechanical and communal characteristics of the activity. Improvisation, in this case, was not geared towards individualism, creativity, or self-expression. After all, the treatise, and many of those that followed, hailed from a monastic, non-professional context, and many such works were geared towards the education of children.

Such a specification is found in Guido of Arezzo's early 11th-century treatise, the *Micrologus*, which (along with other writings of his) revolutionized music teaching and introduced a new method of notating pitch using clefs and staff lines. In this treatise, he also describes a method by which "anything that is spoken can be made into music" (Babb 1978: 74). By assigning certain pitch levels to certain vowels, his method allows for the semi-mechanical composition of a melody to any given text. Although a version of this method could probably have been used by a trained singer to "improvise," Guido does not explicitly suggest this and it is not reported anywhere else. His revision of the *Musica enchiriadis*' rules for improvising polyphony, on the other hand, had lasting repercussions: according to his own words, his refined rules – which sorted intervals hierarchically and sustained the original melody's modal integrity – made the *organum* "smooth." Finally, Guido introduced his principle of the *occursus*, which essentially marks the beginning of the polyphonic cadence and remained a defining element of polyphonic practice from this point onwards. Guido's rules made *organum* more flexible, yet it could still be extemporized by a practiced group of singers. Nevertheless, as these new rules started to allow for different solutions and were neither comprehensive nor all-encompassing, performers needed to either agree upon a particular path for a given piece in advance or follow a common tradition of interpretation. With Guido's rules, the *Musica enchiriadis*' mechanical model of extemporization began to be complemented by a more creative one that required more decision-making and thus a more individualistic approach. Nevertheless, despite the tendency towards even freer models by the end of the 11th century, the older, communal, and mechanical methods continued to be used and elaborated in parallel with more creative ones for centuries to come (Berentsen 2016). Practices of non-mensural polyphony, such as "fifthing" for instance, would remain a part of the musical life until well into the 15th century and can be traced in certain sacred as well as secular repertoires (Lewon 2020; Strohm 2020). Nor were such techniques confined to conservative, communal practice. A famous, sought-after, and innovative composer such as Guillaume Dufay (1397–1474) wrote numerous chant-settings based on the parallel-motion improvisatory model (by this time using a three-part texture with thirds and sixths called "fauxbourdon"). Indeed, it can be claimed that "mechanical" improvisation practices conceptually comparable to the techniques of early *organum* laid the foundations for later

functional harmony. For example, Guilielmus Monachus' late 15th-century treatise *De preceptis artis musicae*, expanded earlier models for unembellished note-against-note counterpoint to include three- and four-voice progressions (Park 1993). His rules provided an easy method for creating chordal progressions with triads in root position while avoiding parallels in perfect intervals. His models were not only used for simple group harmonization of chant melodies, but were expanded and ornamented by professional soloists, and adopted and reworked by renowned composers as the basis for complex compositions. The models, like the *organum* rules, therefore allowed for further development in both extemporized and worked-out styles.

Turning back to the 11th century and to Guido: his new and precise musical notation was adopted outside his own writings to record chant repertoires and provided the means with which the polyphony conceived via the *organum* rules could have been recorded. However, surviving written-out organa in this style are confined to one source: dated ca. 1000, the *Winchester Troper* is a collection of plainchant that includes a substantial section of *organa*, and, thus, represents the earliest surviving repertoire of polyphony (Rankin 2007). This situation opens an ontological problem for the modern analyst, which is duplicated in many later repertoires. In order to reconstruct a practice, it is necessary to create a category of "written down improvisations," which is by no means representative of original attitudes. This designation also separates the "improvised" from the "composed," often according to modern notions of quality. Below, we argue that such a differentiation may miss the point both of a practice governed by strict rules (even if considered creative), and of the act of notation. The style of the Winchester corpus is reminiscent of but does not strictly follow Guido's roughly contemporaneous guidelines, showing how flexible the practice had become in a short space of time and when applied by trained singers. Indeed, a deviation from the rules can be seen as a natural result of the transition away from the classroom. Regular, functional application would have gained its own momentum, transforming and liquefying the rules into a living practice.

The creative model of extemporization had already received written, independent justification by the late 11th century, in a group of four short treatises collectively summarized under the label *Ad organum faciendum* (Eggebrecht and Zaminer 1970). The flexibility of the new rules required a move away from group extemporization as a communal effort. Forsaking a note-against-note counterpoint allowed a hitherto unheard-of amount of freedom that required foresight in mapping out a path for the improvised *vox organalis*, which in turn called for professional soloists. The *Ad organum faciendum* treatises discuss extemporization only of the core structure of two-voice improvisation, its scaffolding, so to speak. One of the treatises indicates a practice (called "coloration") of ornamenting this core, which is not governed by the rules. A small, surviving repertoire of "colored" or "florid" *organa* in the *Codex Calixtinus* (ca. 1140) can be linked to the style of these treatises and demonstrates how inventive and resourceful the singers were in creating their *organa* by the mid-12th century, and how little of their actual practice is covered and reflected by the theory treatises. This gap between the teachings of the treatises and the traces of an actual practice is owed to the monastic theoreticians' attempt to describe, rationalize and capture practices for the purpose of education. They necessarily lag behind the developments of real-life musical practice and mirror them only faintly. The rules of the treatises, however, bear witness to an important conceptual leap towards the extemporized *vox organalis*: it was to be considered a seemingly free voice with the external appearance of independence, liberated from the constraints of parallel movement to the chant melody – this being the trademark of all earlier practices. With this new type of *organum*, we can, for the first time, truly speak of "polyphony," and comparisons with improvisatory practices we recognize today become more meaningful.

In the search for remnants of unwritten practices, we necessarily seek out the exceptional sources. The next step in the development of extemporized polyphony, the *Vatican Organum Treatise* (early 13th century), is such an exception (Godt and Rivera 1984). After a short introduction

which lays out basic principles, the treatise consists entirely of musical examples. These contain a systematic catalogue of sample two-voice progressions that appear to be intended for memorization and mark a significant change in attitude towards "coloration": the embellishments of the core progressions are now in-built and spelled out in the examples. Apparently, by this time, they had become an essential part of the practice. The treatise is linked to a major notated corpus, that is, the *Notre Dame* school (Immel 2001). Thus, while the florid, professional style of the 12th and 13th centuries is often associated with the rise of the idea of named composers (Léonin and Perotin), the association with this treatise suggests that the notated repertoire was conceived to a large part from an unwritten, extemporized practice. The length and scale of some of the surviving organa attests not only to the high standards of professional singers but also to their feats in memorization as all of this was performed by heart. This emphasis on memory merits further consideration, as it marks a consistent medieval approach to the generation of "free" improvisation, even to the very idea of creativity (Carruthers 2008). Novelty does not arise *ex nihilo*. Instead of relying on inspiration, it consciously uses, reuses, and manipulates materials from a memorized store of previous experiences, both personal and learned from external sources (Busse Berger 2005). In practice, learning to improvise in many later styles uses a not dissimilar technique (see Lara Pearson, this volume). This supports the view that improvisation does not have to be equated with individuality and expressivity. It also questions notions of temporality and the uniqueness of the improvisatory act. A performer with a trained memory could, after all, pre-decide and repeat the contours of performance without annotation. Nevertheless, remembering that theoretical rules were designed for instructing children (Fuller 2013), expert singers would have developed their own bank of examples and personal aesthetic language, transferring the locus of individualism to the area of preparation and learned experience rather than to technique during the momentary act of creation. Another section of the *Vatican Organum Treatise* consists of a collection of monophonic stock-phrases complementing the sample progressions. The presence of such melodic phrases devoid of polyphonic context in a treatise on two-voice polyphony shows the importance given to melodic beauty and consistency in the newly created voice. Though the *Vatican Organum Treatise* bears rare testimony to this phenomenon, it does not stand alone: The *Berkeley Treatise* from the second half of the 14th century concludes its chapter on the principles of two-voice counterpoint with a collection of melodic phrases (here called *verbula*), applicable for ornamenting polyphonic core structures (Ellsworth 1984). Once more, the horizontal melodic line is the center of attention. The most remarkable difference to the monophonic phrases of the *Vatican Organum Treatise* is a refined rhythmical element that governed polyphony by the time of the *Berkeley Treatise,* and which pervades its teachings. Stock-phrases are here sorted according to rhythmic groupings and thus add another layer of intricacy to the singers' art of "descanting."

The art of "coloration" or the ornamentation of a line, whether polyphonic or monophonic, had been an integral part of extemporization since at least the time of the *Ad organum faciendum* treatises. The practical examples of the *Vatican* and *Berkeley* treatises appear to shed some light on this, but statements from other theoreticians qualify any universality we may want to draw from them. Hieronymus de Moravia, for instance, meticulously described the habits of Parisian singers and the ways they performed and ornamented ca. 1300. Nevertheless, he is keen to stress that these practices are not observed by all, and that in some matters all the nations disagree in singing (Weber 2009: 393, 395). Similar separations between French, English, and Italian improvisatory practices are hinted at by Guilielmus Monachus. A different separation is offered by the author of the *Tractatus figurarum*, who, in an attempt to codify the notation of the extremely complex style of the late 14th and early 15th centuries, introduced his work by asserting that "it should not be that theorists cannot notate things that performers execute" (Schreur 1989: 72 f.). That the resulting rhythms were described as not having been replicated until the works of Stravinsky hints at the high level of sophistication of improvisatory practices now lost to us (Apel 1973).

All traces of extemporized practices discussed so far were confined to sacred vocal performance. By the 15th century, we have manuscript evidence that this phenomenon was extended to instrumental practices, specifically to the organ. *Fundamentum organisandi* is a title shared by a group of sources that also contain organ tablatures, most prominently the *Lochamer Liederbuch* (ca. 1450) and the *Buxheimer Orgelbuch* (ca. 1480). While the tablatures themselves consist to a large part of ornamented versions of vocal music, the *Fundamenta* sections present a collection of polyphonic discantus (i.e., upper voice) movements over pre-given tenor progressions (i.e., a *cantus firmus*). In this they resemble the collection of the *Vatican Organum Treatise*. "They were clearly conceived as models for extemporizing right hand gestures upon a slow moving *cantus firmus*. They offer a "Spielvorgang" (i.e., a process of playing): a practice separate from free improvisation, composition, or the diminution of a preexisting line (Zöbeley 1964).

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As previously noted, the cultural context in the Middle Ages did not encourage the notation of codified extemporization practices outside the church. We are thus lacking information on how comparable practices were applied in secular environments. From iconographical evidence and descriptions of performances, we know, for example, that instrumentalists accompanied monophony, that wind bands performed dance music, and that lute duos improvised with great virtuosity upon chanson melodies. Where they learned their craft and which techniques they employed, however, remains educated guesswork. One place of exchange and of learning must have been the minstrel schools – annual meetings during Lent, to which courtly instrumentalists from all over Europe travelled and which are recorded to have taken place mostly in Flanders between ca. 1300 and ca. 1450 (Wegman 2002). Professional instrumentalists also often came from musician families and would have learned at least part of their trade at home.

Even though the techniques of instrumentalists were not described in theory treatises, some cursory references confirm that they were aware of the rules of counterpoint. Hieronymus de Moravia's treatise, for instance, provides tunings for the vielle and states that accompanying drone strings on this instrument were only to be played if they resulted in certain consonances against the main melody (Weber 2009: 500). Thus, modern performers tend to transfer techniques from monastic treatises and sacred music collections when performing secular music. Similarly, the polyphonic amplification of dance melodies often adopts either Guilielmus Monachus' "harmony by numbers" models or the ornamentation techniques of the *Fundamenta organisandi*. Beyond our problematic knowledge of the past, modern practitioners are also hampered by the limited, patchy, and inconsistent provision of education in this field (Potter 2018: 620–4). Nevertheless, if we assume a general background within "classical" musical education for those choosing to specialize in medieval music, it may be safe to assume a widespread reticence towards improvisation, with practitioners viewing the activity as unstructured and bound up with mystical notions of inspiration.[5] The institutional history at the heart of this friction is not our focus here. It is brought up for its wider resonances in relation to audiences, and as a nod towards the need for awareness in planning educational approaches, where techniques cannot be effective without considering style-specific requirements.

When considering contemporary audiences, it is important to note that, on the whole, they tend to have minimal exposure to or background knowledge of medieval music in comparison to many other areas of the contemporary entertainment "mainstream." Its appeal, therefore, is (and always has been) closely intertwined with both non-musical projections of "past-ness" and expectations formed by the consumption of other music (Haines 2018). There is, therefore, no contradiction between the notion of value through age – be it religious, national, racial, or of less-specific "otherness" – and the suffusion of the actual musical presentation by other

recognizable traditions, however incongruous to the Middle Ages they may be (Haines 2001; Meyer and Yri 2020). At least nominally, audiences are thus attracted to an authority external to the performers, wanting to hear something of an often vague or imagined "then" rather than of the "now." This problematizes the position of improvisation within the performance of medieval materials. On the one hand, improvising necessarily new material can be understood as a dilution of any authoritative "past-ness," as it muddies the boundary between current and past temporalities. On the other hand, for a performance to be convincing and to be deemed personally "genuine" (rather than historically "authentic"), it has to overcome exactly this boundary (Mariani 2017; see also Garry Hagberg, this volume). Here, improvisation acts as a byword for cultural assimilation and, therefore, as a demonstration by performers that their access to the past is both superior to that of their audiences, as well as mystically communicative. At least in relation to the performance of certain medieval repertoires – for example, the incorporation of instruments into the performance of monophonic song – an expectation exists for improvisation to be part of the currency of authenticity. This, however, does not necessarily imply intrinsic creativity and expression, nor does it relate directly to reconstructionist interests (Kreutziger-Herr and Redepenning 2000; Haug 2009).

The next question that arises relates to the communication of improvisation. After all, it is rare for audiences to know and recognize the medieval materials performed, and when such knowledge exists, it usually arises from exposure to other performances rather than to the original material itself. How, then, can audiences discern the presence of improvisation in real time? Of course, this can be communicated through a range of non-musical means that cannot be considered here. Within the musical offering, audience expectations are routinely channeled through a number of technical and structural frameworks, which necessarily rely on wider contemporaneous practices rather than on the medieval materials. As both performers and audiences have grown up and been educated surrounded by other kinds of music, their actions are measured up against other practices. For example, it is common for instrumentation to be used for demarcating authorial materials performed vocally from improvised materials performed instrumentally. This is often combined with structural segmentation, whereby preludes, interludes, and postludes make space for improvised or pseudo-improvised materials that can relate to their model without obscuring it. Alternatively, technical differentiators may be applied, such as the contrasting between sections of measurable and "free" rhythm to mark the separation between old and new (which can work in both directions). A cynical view of our current cultural constellation may even claim that the successful public conveyance of historical authenticity requires sacrificing even the little nuggets of historical truth that we can still discern. All this raises questions relating to the original consumption of improvised materials, requiring a second historical overview: this time, not from the point of view of improvisers, but from that of the consumers of their efforts.

Historical Overview II: Consuming Music in the Middle Ages

Any attempt to discuss the medieval appreciation of improvised music must first outline a more general model for musical consumption. This complex task underlines how different past attitudes are to our own and, thus, how problematic it is to compare cross-cultural improvisatory practices. The ontology of musical consumption can be broken down into several constituent parts. These include social attitudes towards music and musicians; cultural attitudes to the act of listening; intellectual concepts of authority, flexibility, performance, and reproducibility; and, finally, the designation of importance and value. In the following sketch, we briefly follow these four elements in turn, apportioning a paragraph to each one.

It is becoming increasingly evident that medieval consumers were entirely at ease with separating an abstracted idea of music from the practical experience of sound. This is most visible

within the educational context, where the Seven Liberal Arts placed *Musica* as one of mathematical *quadrivium* subjects. Its main objective was to teach the (mathematical) rules of proportion as well as their presence and influences within the hermetic medieval world view. Its tuition had nothing to do with sound-production or its cultural enjoyment (Dyer 2009). This separability, however, can be transferred also to the production, procurement, and use of music books. Above, we have already mentioned the social and functional separation between the act of writing or owning books and the performance of their contents. To these examples can be added the inclusion of musical notation in luxurious liturgical manuscripts, even in contexts where performance did not rely on notation or was not at all envisaged.[6] The special case of polyphony adds another distancing layer, with the near ubiquitous medieval tendency to notate it in separate parts rather than in score format. While the modern preference for scores results in much wasted page-space, it allows readers to equate vertical alignment with simultaneity, and so form an impression of an entire musical texture away from performance. The medieval layout, with voices copied out in full one after the other or side by side, is spatially more efficient, but results in each voice moving at a different speed within its distinct geography on the page. Thus, even polyphonic reading during real-time performance was all but impossible, let alone the mental realization of music away from it (Smilansky 2011). The audible consumption of such music cannot be conflated with the visual consumption of its notation. This independence enables also a separation in both time and place between the two activities: as the visual consumption of the musical artifact was not focused on musical understanding, its non-musical elements could be consumed just as successfully away from performance and with little to no reference to sonic content. Consequently, the value of musicality was separable from the figure of the performer. Even during performance, audience attention would just as likely be directed to a musical artifact, to other members of the consuming group, and, in particular, to socially superior patrons (Page 1997). It is, therefore, not surprising that the social standing of professional musicians was not high, and only on rare occasions would attention and interest be directed towards their creative process (Salmen 1983).[7]

This leads us directly to the medieval understanding of listening and participation. The graded model of liturgical involvement offered by Daniele Filippi presents a much wider range of engagement levels than we are likely to accept now as appropriate or satisfying (Filippi 2017). Of course, the liturgical experience has its own emphases, involving also architectural, material, and other non-musical sensory input. Still, it is important to recognize that an intention to participate and a general proximity to a church where a service was taking place – while far from ideal – could under certain circumstances fulfill the spiritual requirement of attendance and religious observance. Likewise, hearing without understanding was acceptable for considerable portions of society. Interestingly, the highest form of consumption was not deemed to be rapt attention to the proceedings, but an individualistic, internalized meditation, instigated by – but not limited to – the specific external cues on offer. It seems likely that audiences transferred similar listening techniques also when exposed to the secular soundscape. If preference was given to personalized meaning constructed by the consumer, it follows that the performance itself cannot pretend to communicate a specific, authoritative and pre-determined meaning to be shared by the listening community. Communication is further undermined by the acceptance that this "listening community" can be wider than those of its members that can physically hear (let alone, understand) the performance. The entangled roles of composer and performer are thus problematized.

Beyond the general non-conflation of the written and the heard discussed above, it should be remembered that musical literacy among both public and musicians was lower in the Middle Ages than it is now, forcing a reliance on memory instead. When notation did occur, many parameters that to us seem integral are missing from the surviving sources, including instrumentation, articulation, dynamics, some chromatic inflections, and any expressive annotations.

Consequently, those who could read music did not expect a full set of instructions able to support a consistent reproduction. It appears that consumers did not expect reproduction either. Indeed, it seems much more likely that uniqueness was deemed more attractive than reproducibility, and that musicians took drastic measures in order to make their offerings contextually appropriate (Smilansky, 2021). At the very least, the partiality of the instructions provided by notated artifacts meant that realizations based on them required a creative, interventionist stance, not one limited to detached execution. The expectation to adapt, amplify or simplify materials in performance suggests that a similar approach pertained also to music learned by ear. All in all, a practical disinterest in the notion of *urtext* and a functional expectation of variety support the continuing questioning of the notions of "work" in performance.[8] At the same time, "works" were allowed to flourish intellectually, conceptually and in notation. This situation has clear implications on our ability to distinguish a framework within which we can analyze the idea and practices of improvisation. Not because they were not present, but because our vocabulary and conceptualizations do not apply.

Finally, this discussion leads us to inquire what medieval consumers listened out for – once listening eventually occurred. Here, we are hampered by the difficulty in creating analytical models that deal with medieval expressivity as well as compositional technique (Smilansky 2017; Leach 2019). Nevertheless, compositional attitudes and medieval descriptions generally suggest that a prominent model of creativity involved a proposed synthesis between old and new, between authority and experimentation (Plumley 2013). At first sight, this model may seem intrinsically supportive of extemporization. Still, while it certainly supported musical and poetic creativity (both pre-composed and forged in real time), the main loci for improvised engagement were on the other end of the spectrum. For musical expansions of both liturgy and dance accompaniment to function successfully, the improvised performance needed to privilege the integrity of the pre-given materials. They were the vehicles through which either mystical communion in prayer or the rhythms and structure of dance were to be regulated. However much expanded or hidden, it was the chant or the dance melody that mattered, with any embellishment or manipulation remaining subservient to the preexisting material on which it was based. Here, the improviser's role was not to go beyond, challenge, or imprint their personality over the base material, but to support it, engage with it, and make it more pleasing or effective for social consumption. At least in these contexts, the notion "improvisational phronesis" (as explored by Bruce Ellis Benson in this volume) does not hold. Even when improvisation was used to ease the passage of time (for example, during communion), it was not supposed to distract from the devotional activity at hand. It was the inner life of those partaking in the action that mattered, not that of the performer providing the musical accompaniment. The improviser's effort, therefore and once again, could not make too many claims on consumers' attention or be primarily concerned with projecting individual expressivity.

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Of course, not all the characteristics described above hold for every instance of musical performance at each point of time and place within the vastness of the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, the cultural forces that sustained them point towards a context in which the discussion of improvisation becomes more and more difficult. On the one hand, we have seen a blurring (in relation to many later practices, though by no means all) between the roles of the composer and performer. The expectation that musicians adjust their offerings to the needs and opportunities of changing contexts becomes an extreme form of the symbiosis between the two roles of improvisation, as explored by Robert Valgenti in this volume, but with society affecting changes as much as the performer's personal style. This, and the preference of uniqueness over reproducibility promote

improvisatory elements as essential for professional success. On the other hand, none of these adjustments had to occur in real time during performance. From the consumers' point of view, the audiences' inability to follow written versions, to relate performances to other hearings, and a general disinterest in any author-sanctioned singularity destabilized the division between the improvised and the composed. Even if listeners had the capacity to distinguish whether materials were improvised or not, it is unlikely they would have dedicated time and effort to such an activity (Wegman 1996; Lehmann and Kopiez 2010). After all, the center of attention in performance was on them and their needs, not on the creativity and status of the performer. For the most part, musicians derived status from their patrons, not the other way around. What, then, is improvisation for, if it is not noticed, appreciated, or deemed interesting by its audience? To what degree does it matter whether creativity was pre-planned or momentary, especially in a context where memory training challenges the validity of such a duality, and which did not privilege spontaneity or inspiration? Was improvisation a badge of professional pride primarily within a closed community of musical practitioners? Was it a "secret of the trade" that the uninitiated did not even know existed?

This, perhaps, would be taking things too far. After all, we have seen a consumptive expectation for notated materials to be realized differently in each instance and thus an acceptance of performative, temporally bound input. We also have some evidence of real-time competitive creativity (though more often literary than strictly musical) and, towards the end of the Middle Ages, of a number of famed improvisers making a career out of extemporization. At the very least, we can construct a joint currency of opulence and ephemerality. A grading of opulence allows the same notated materials (or shared oral knowledge) to sound more or less special according to accepted sonic parameters that defined the momentary artifact: the number of voices offered, the use of certain musical techniques or effects, and varying levels of virtuosity, complexity, and subtlety. This has both temporal and social potential: it can be used to mark special days or events (and thus, audiences) as of higher status, and the ability to maintain musicians capable of providing such services project patrons' economic clout and aesthetic sophistication. A reliance on improvisation and the ephemeral uniqueness with which it is infused enhances the geo-temporal component of an opulent performance. Being impossible to reconstruct, it stresses the importance of personal access to the event, while subsequent attempts at its notation and circulation allow for at least elements of its grandeur to reverberate more widely. Still, the performance of uniqueness, does not necessitate real-time creativity. As multiple analyses of improvisation attest, it can be both minutely planned, rehearsed, and – to all practical extent and purposes – repeatable. But where do all these questions leave us?

A Synthesis?

In collecting and presenting the materials above, we did not attempt to define an essential ontology – or even multiple ontologies – of improvisation in the Middle Ages, nor, indeed, a unique approach promulgated by modern practice or expected by current audiences. The various stances considered – across time, but also across the performer-consumer divide – were chosen in order to highlight the multiple ontological frictions between what can be experienced as axiomatic fundamentals of musical interaction and the cultural constructs of the medieval past. By showing similarities with the preoccupations of the discussions presented here, as well as the alternatives offered by a culture both remote and linked to our own, we hoped to dislodge the separation between past and present. On the one hand, history has much to contribute to the evaluation of current philosophical discourse. On the other, it is open and receptive to new ideologies and approaches. For example, the separation between designer-centric and player-centric analysis in Thi Nguyen's contribution to this volume can easily be mapped on to our discussion of the performer-audience relationship.

Furthermore, whether one is interested in integrating creativity into education ; unlocking the mental processes or practical techniques of improvisers; or understanding the social resonances and public perception of improvised music, the foreignness of medieval perceptions forces us not to take any parameter for granted. Thus, when analyzing audiences' experiential response to improvisation, we must first clearly define what it is that is perceived to be improvised and the contextual host-culture's approach to listening to, engaging with, and understanding its own aestheticized sound-world. Similarly, we must clarify that the neural mapping of the improvisatory act is underscored by the cultural processes, practices, and educational background of the mapped individual. They offer local, culture-specific data that cannot readily be abstracted into universals across time and space. Finally, any inquiry into performers' discipline, creativity, and expressivity cannot be undertaken in the abstract. They too require contextualization into the needs and opportunities of the society in which they are found.

When planning our ontological inquiries, we would do well to remember the possible existence of creativity that is not inspired, or ephemerality that is not performer- or expression-centered. By acknowledging the specificity and sophistication of entirely foreign medieval practices we take more care in claiming universals, or in downplaying the importance of education, economics, and consumer-expectations in shaping what it is practitioners do. It even affects how we construct the meaning of the term "improvisation" at any given time and place.

Related Topics

Benson, B. E. (This Volume) "Improvisational *Phronesis*."
Hagberg, G. (This Volume) "Jazz Improvisation, Authenticity, and Self-Expression."
Moruzzi, C. (This Volume) "Improvisation as Creative Performance."
'Nguyen, C. Thi (This Volume) "Creativity and Improvisation in Games."
Pearson, L. (This Volume) "'Improvisation' in Play: A View through South Indian Music Practices."
Valgenti, R. T. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Ontology of Formativity."

Notes

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2 For a statistical model of loss relating to 14th-century Italian music see Cuthbert 2009.
3 John Haines, for example, takes one medieval repertoire and traces the changing attitudes towards it across the centuries (Haines 2004).
4 Martin Kirnbauer, for instance, reconstructs Hartmann Schedel's process of mechanically copying his song book to compensate for a lack of musical proficiency, leaving it unusable as a musical collection (Kirnbauer 2001).
5 It is worth noting here that the discussion of improvisation is often not flexible and varied enough to accommodate distinctions between temporal and aesthetic trends within the Western "classical" (and pre-classical) tradition, and that historically, the subject has been ideologically and morally charged, usually against preoccupation with improvisation. The former issue is exemplified by Siljamäki and Kanellopoulos (Siljamäki and Kanellopoulos 2020), while the negative value-judgment of improvisation as a tag for phenomena unworthy of study is discussed by Laudan Nooshin (Nooshin 2003).
6 For example, Wright discusses the bad lighting in Notre Dame in Paris and the need to rely on memory also when books were actually present (Wright 1989).
7 It is worth noting, however, that one can identify a fashion for explicitly musical stardom and celebrity developing during the 15th century (Starr 2004; Blackburn 2018).
8 For the position of pre-1800 practices in the discussion of the musical "work," see, for example, Strohm 2000. This characterization greatly expands the range of admissible versions encompassed by Caterina Moruzzi's notion of "repeatability" discussed in this volume.

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23

IMPROVISATION AND ESSENTIAL ORNAMENTATION IN VOCAL MUSIC (1600–1900)

Livio Marcaletti

1 The Complicated Coexistence between Improvisation and Authenticity

In Western art music, improvisation is often based on a compromise between the performer's freedom and the composer's will. Solo vocal music – especially in the period between the 17th and 19th centuries – constitutes one of the repertoires involving improvisation at the highest degree, namely, with respect to ornamentation. Ornamentation in this period was both a notational practice, consisting of graces marked on the score in small notes or special symbols to be deciphered, and a performance practice in which the performer deliberately adds unmarked embellishments, a form of free improvisation. Thus, a singer improvising ornaments diverges from the written score, which presently is often considered an inviolable testament of the composer's intention that must be respected as the only way to render music from the past (Harnoncourt 2004: 15). If the written notes are established as a depository of the composer's will, a singer's efforts to deviate from the score by adding embellishments may not be appreciated, as demonstrated in the following anecdote reported by Will Crutchfield:

> A mezzo-soprano interested in matters of performance practice recently wrote to me about an incident when she added a few passing elaborations to 'Voi che sapete' at a rehearsal. The distinguished conductor stopped the orchestra and enquired, 'Who is the great composer here, you or Mozart?'
>
> *(Crutchfield 1988: 21)*

The conductor assumes here that what Mozart wrote is exactly what he required from the singer, no more and no less, and that the performance should follow the score exactly. Richard Taruskin questions the absurd results of this struggle for authenticity in the field of early modern ornamentation:

> Recording some fifteenth-century chansons under the direction of a scholar-performer with exacting standards of textual authenticity, my instrumentalist colleagues and I ornamented the cadences in a manner derived from variations observed in the sources transmitting this repertory. The director, who had made his own transcriptions from the sources he preferred, insisted that we refrain from tampering with them. The ensuing quarrel was resolved by a compromise: the director made a collation of all the sources for the pieces we were to record, and supplied us with embellishments drawn from alternative sources for the passages we wished to decorate. In this way he could be satisfied that our ornaments were "authentic".
>
> *(Taruskin 1995: 71)*

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Such an approach puts ornamentation (a performance element) on the same level as the text on which the performance should be based. As Taruskin concludes, "Modern performers seem to regard their performances as texts rather than acts, and to prepare for them with the same goal as present-day textual editors: to clear away accretions." According to Taruskin, once the text is cleared, performers should then introduce their own interpretative elements. Instead, "once the accretions have been removed, what is to take their place? All too often the answer is: nothing. […] Nothing is allowed to intrude into the performance that cannot be 'authenticated.'" In this concept of "authentic" performance of early music, improvisation is thus excluded.

What is meant by the label "authenticity?" This term has often been used in "historically informed" performances of Western art music, that is, performances trying to reconstruct historical performance conditions, using original instruments (or copies thereof). For many years, especially in the 1970s and 1980s, the word "authentic" was applied to historically informed recordings as a marketing strategy to win the competition between recordings using historical instruments and those playing with modern instruments. From a philosophical point of view, authenticity means different things in the context of the performance of "classical" music, as Peter Kivy showed in his excellent book *Authenticities* (1995). The first type of authenticity addressed in Kivy's book is the "authenticity of intentions," according to which authenticity is created by the way a performer tries to adhere to the "intentions" expressed by the composer. However, according to Taruskin,

> the intentions of composers are simply inaccessible to us in the first place and, further, that, at least with regard to the kinds of performing intention that those in quest of historical authenticity are seeking, composers don't really have them at all.
>
> *(Kivy 1995: 13)*

Kivy remarks that Taruskin "is not, of course, denying that composers have had performing intentions. What he is denying, is that composers have had, as he puts it, 'the intentions we would like to ascertain'" (Kivy 1995: 19).

In this regard, Kivy distinguishes between "strong intentions" or "commands" and mere "suggestions or conjectures, fully open to the performer's discretionary judgement" (Kivy 1995: 31). Furthermore, composers can decide to share the responsibility of the creation with performers, such as in the case of ornamentation. Kivy notes that the High Baroque was "one of the most performer-oriented periods in the history of Western art music" (Kivy 1995: 128). In this epoch, "the ornamenting of a melodic line was the task of all soloists, whether instrumental or vocal" (Kivy 1995: 129). Kivy believes that a highly ornamented performance constitutes "an original creation" that is "personally authentic" such that "two performances of the same work will contain, in significant places, very different notes" (Kivy 1995: 130).

Despite the value of Kivy's link between ornamentation and improvisation, his contextualization of the phenomenon needs a correction based on the evidence that can be inferred from historical sources. By reading Kivy, one gets the impression that the variation of a melodic line through divisions – a practice consisting of the "division" of each written note into several shorter ones – was the only way of ornamenting, and that it existed only in the High Baroque. In order to bring into focus the role of ornamentation in Western vocal music and extend it to additional situations that Kivy does not consider, one must first clarify the concept of the ornament.

The word "ornament," as well as its synonym "embellishment," are – in everyday language – linked to the concept of something "accessory" or "optional." According to the Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, an ornament is "a useful accessory," "something that lends grace, beauty, or festivity," "one whose virtues or graces add luster to a place or society," "the act of adorning or being adorned," and, most notably for music, "an embellishing note not belonging to the essential harmony or melody – called also *embellishment*, *fioritura*." All these definitions have two common

points: an ornament is (1) something linked to beauty and grace; (2) something additional or optional that does not belong to the essence of the object it embellishes. A more precise definition of a musical ornament requires historical and geographical contextualization. Narrowing the field to Western art music, the New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians (2nd ed., 2001) defines the ornament as

> those more or less brief and conventional formulae of embellishment which have always been liable to occur within traditions of free ornamentation […] and which proliferated in European music of the Baroque period. They have often been indicated by symbols, although composers, performers, music copyists and editors, and scholars have by no means always shown consistency or agreement in the use of specific symbols. […] Throughout much of the history of western European music, performers have been inclined to embellish the notes provided them by the composer. Even in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, it is convenient to make a distinction between two kinds of embellishment. On the one hand, the technique of applying improvised or semi-improvised running figuration patterns to a given melody, so called divisions or *passaggi,* creates melodic variation. Graces, on the other hand, are conventional melodic ornaments applied to single notes; by the Baroque era graces were indicated by a variety of stylized signs, most of which had, at least by intention, a particular meaning.
>
> *(Kreitner 2001)*

What can be taken away from the beginning of this long article (quoted above)? Ornaments are "brief and conventional formulae" indicated through symbols. Thus, composers can – and often do – write them in, but sometimes they are left to performers, who "have been inclined to embellish the notes provided them by the composer." Nevertheless, how free can performers be in their additions, and how faithful should they remain to the notes initially written by the composer? With respect to solo vocal music, the singer's approach to ornamentation has profoundly changed in the 20th century. Over the course of the 19th century, composers began exerting more creative control over their work, and vocal pedagogy adapted itself to this change. As a result, the written score attained a sort of untouchable supremacy, leading to the limitation of ornamentation, which could be added only in exceptional cases. This attitude towards ornamentation can be found in 20th-century singing treatises, such as in this iconic statement from *Il canto e il suo insegnamento razionale* (1913) by Italian pedagogue Giulio Silva:

> There is not much to say about musical embellishments used in vocal music, at least from the technical point of view. It will suffice to enumerate and define them, then adding some necessary practical observations. Embellishments are *accessories* of the melodic idea, almost *pleonasms* of the musical discourse. Therefore, they must be performed as light as possible in relation to the ordinary passages; at the same time, they must be precise, rapid and almost always must bring a secondary accent with regard to the main notes in the music sentence.
>
> *(Silva 1913: 258; my translation: L.M.)*

By the beginning of the 20th century, ornamentation had become an accessory element of the melodic idea. By contrast, the singing didactics of the previous centuries considered ornamentation an essential component of performance: the syntagma "essential ornamentation" was no oxymoron (though it would be considered so according to 20th-century conception). The essentiality of ornamentation in vocal music is particularly evident in how it was taught in German singing treatises from the 17th century onwards. Starting in the 17th century, the so-called "Italian manner of singing" was assimilated into German vocal didactics through the dichotomization of ornamentation into "essential" graces and "arbitrary" embellishments.

2 Ornamentation and the "Italian Manner of Singing"

In his *Syntagma Musicum* (1619), composer and music theoretician Michael Praetorius offers a sort of update of all musical novelties coming from abroad. Among these was the "itzige Italianische Manier" (the current Italian manner) of singing, introduced in the third volume of the *Syntagma Musicum*. He was the first to use this phrase to describe the Italian style, which he mainly learned through prints of Italian treatises and music.

In the chapter entitled *Instructio pro symphoniacis*, Praetorius addresses music teachers of the German *Lateinschulen*, schools that prepared students for ecclesiastic studies, law, and medicine at university. In particular, the chapter aims to teach singing to the so-called *Symphoniaci*, pupils who could sing polyphony in the church. Praetorius begins the chapter with a comparison between the art of rhetoric and the Italian manner of singing, thus addressing the concept of "pronunciation" rather than "ornamentation":

> Just as the task of an *Orator* is not only to decorate an oration with beautiful, charming and lively words, and with wonderful *Figures*, but also to *pronounce* correctly and to *move* the *affect*, for which purpose he now lifts the voice, then lets it sink, now speaks with a powerful, now gentle, now with a full and entire voice, it is also [the task] of a musician not only to sing but to sing with art and charm. Thus is the heart of the listener stirred and the *affect* moved, so that the song may reach the purpose for which it is made and toward which it is directed.
>
> *(Praetorius 1619: 229, transl. in Butt 1994: 48)*

According to Praetorius' comparison, the Italian manner of singing represents the way to sing "with art and charm," that is, to "pronounce" what the composer writes in the way that touches the heart of the listener. Praetorius is not the first theoretician to present ornamentation as *tertium comparationis* between rhetoric and singing; Joachim Burmeister in *Musica Poetica* (1606) and Lippius in *Synopsis musicae novae* (1612) had already instituted such a comparison (Butt 1994: 47). In the traditional rhetorical model taken from Quintilianus' *Institutio oratoria*, the construction of a speech consists of different phases, called *inventio* (discovery of arguments), *dispositio* (their arrangement), *elaboratio* (style), *memoria* (memorization) and *pronuntiatio* (delivery). To which category would the ornamentation introduced by the performer belong? While those already written out by the composer are part of the *elaboratio*, those performed by the singer should be part of *pronuntiatio*.

According to Praetorius, the "Italian manner of singing" consists of the execution of different types of ornamentation that he imports from the Italian practice. In particular, he refers to two Italian publications: *Regole* by Giovanni Battista Bovicelli (1594) and the preface to *Le nuove musiche* by Giulio Caccini (1601/02). Both are printed collections of solo vocal music, sacred and secular, with prefaces in which the author provides a series of rules and principles for embellishing written melodies. Praetorius does not limit himself to importing these ornaments but also gives his own interpretation. A striking example is the *Intonatio,* the practice of approaching the beginning of a melody from a lower note, defined by Praetorius as follows:

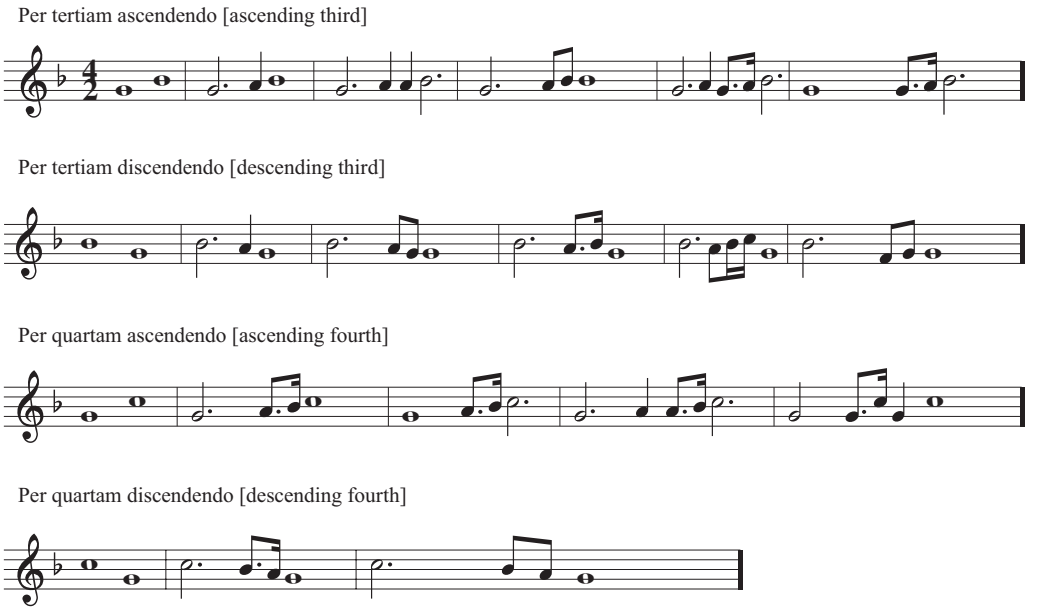
> *Intonatio* is how a song is to be started: and there are differing opinions about it. Some desire that it be begun on the correct note, many on the second below the correct note, but so that one gradually rises with the voice and lifts the same; several on the third, same on the fourth, several with a charming and muted voice, which varied fashions are mostly conceived under the name *accentus*.
>
> *(Praetorius 1619: 231, transl. in Butt 1994: 124)*

Per tertiam ascendendo [ascending third]
Per tertiam discendendo [descending third]
Per quartam ascendendo [ascending fourth]
Per quartam discendendo [descending fourth]

Figure 23.1 Musical examples from Michael Praetorius, *Syntagma Musicum III*, Wolfenbüttel: Holwein, 1619: 234.

Among the other ornaments in the "Italian manner of singing," Praetorius presents the accent (*Accentus*) as one of the most common ways to pronounce a musical interval. The numerous musical examples are sorted by interval so that pupils learn them by associating each interval with several patterns, each made of one, two or more notes (Figure 23.1).

This learning strategy enables pupils to assimilate many alternative ways to pronounce the same interval whenever it appears in the score; they can, thus, extemporaneously render them in performance, changing the written melody each time.

3 *Cantar Sodo* as Essential Ornamentation

Michael Praetorius is only the first in a long series of German authors who wrote treatises on vocal ornamentation in relation to the Italian practice. In the following decades, other German didacts elaborated new theories of ornamentation (Butt 1994: 134). Regarding the idea of "essential" ornamentation, Christoph Bernhard's *Von der Singe-Kunst oder Maniera* (ca. 1650) is one of the central writings of the mid-17th century. Bernhard (1628–92), who worked most of his life at the Dresden court as a singer and composer, had come in contact with Italian music both while traveling in Italy (meeting Giacomo Carissimi, among others), and also in Warsaw, where he may have studied with Marco Scacchi. Although the manuscript was never printed, his treatise had a long-lasting effect on German didactics thanks to the printed manual written by one of his pupils, Wolfgang Michael Mylius (1636–1713). Mylius relied on Bernhard's teaching and subsequently enabled Bernhard's ideas to be disseminated through time: Mylius' *Rudimenta Musices* (1685) was still quoted in bibliographical works of the mid-18th century. In his *Anleitung zu der musikalischen Gelahrtheit* (1758), music teacher and organist Jakob Adlung refers to Mylius to describe the different types of vocal *Manieren* (*Sängermanieren*) (Adlung 1758: 621).

In his short handwritten work, Christoph Bernhard elaborates a striking tripartition of the Italian manner of singing, dividing it into "cantar sodo," "cantar d'affetto" and "cantar passaggiato.

> And the *Manier* is of two types: one remains close to the written notes, the other changes them. That which remains close to the notes is also divided in two types: the one considers only notes while the other also considers the text […]. The type which remains close to the notes is called *Cantar sodo*, or the plain or immediate singing. However, it is not so easy to learn, nor does the singer perform solely the notes written; by contrast, it is in fact the most difficult and hard way to sing, and it is the fundament of the other types. It is so called, because it is not modified through divisions, yet every note receives its own ornament.
>
> *(Müller-Blattau 1999: 31; my translation: L.M.)*

In short, *cantar sodo* is singing according to the written notes; *cantar d'affetto* with the particular observance of the pronunciation and meaning of the text and *cantar passaggiato* the embellishment of the written melody through divisions (*passaggi*). One could assume that "cantar sodo" means singing all that is written out without adding or changing anything, yet Bernhard recommends the use of several *Kunststücke* (ornaments) when singing in this style, amongst others:

- Accento (accent)
- Anticipazione della nota (anticipation of the note)
- Anticipazione della sillaba (anticipation of the syllable)
- Cercar della nota (searching for the note)
- Trillo (shake)
- Tremolo
- Piano and forte
- Fermo (stable, stationary, i.e., absence of vibrato) and ardire (literally "courage," i.e., vibrato; Figure 23.2)

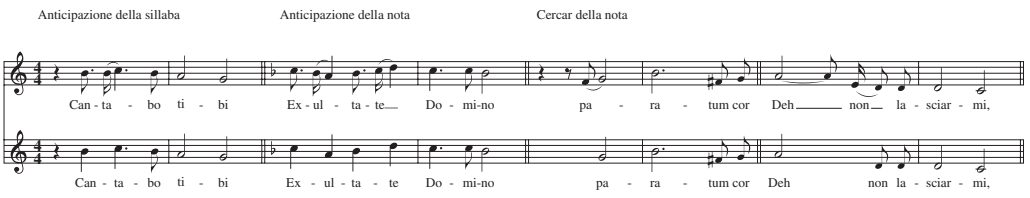
Apart from the last ornaments, which are related to articulation and dynamics, the first four all consist of a neighbor note introduced according to different rules. For instance, *anticipazioni* are called as such because they anticipate either the next syllable of the text (*anticipazione della sillaba*) or the next pitch (*anticipazione della nota*). As a result, either a new syllable is pronounced on the same note, or a new note is sounded without articulating a new syllable, which allows for more legato singing. *Cercar la nota* is an ornament similar to that described in Caccini and to *Intonatio*: a melody is begun not directly on the written note but is approached from below. Finally, *trillo* and *tremolo* are equivalent to a shake on one and two notes, respectively. Piano and forte concern dynamics, while *fermo* and *ardire* refer to the production of sounds without or with vibrato, respectively. The

Anticipazione della sillaba
Anticipazione della nota
Cercar della nota
Can - ta - bo ti - bi
Ex - ul - ta - te
Do - mi-no
pa - ra - tum cor
Deh
non
la - sciar - mi,
Can - ta - bo ti - bi
Ex - ul - ta - te
Do - mi-no
pa - ra - tum cor
Deh
non la - sciar - mi,

Figure 23.2 Musical examples from Christoph Bernhard, *Von der Singekunst*, ca. 1650, passim.

novelty of Bernhard's categorization is, thus, the clear distinction between a first, essential level of ornamentation (*cantar sodo*), made of small modifications of the vocal line, and a second (*cantar passaggiato*), consisting of more radical rewritings of the melody through the addition of several fast notes.

A more precise idea of when and how often these ornaments should be used is presented in Mylius' *Rudimenta Musices* (1685). Mylius visualizes some possible performance choices through an appendix of several short pieces in which *Manieren* are applied. Since the *Manieren* are indicated with abbreviations, the performer is not limited to a precise pitch or duration and can, therefore, respect the markings while singing the same piece in different ways (Bassani 2008; Figure 23.3).

In modern terms, we could consider it a sort of open score with different possibilities for improvisation. What is clear is that a performance without any ornament would be incomplete.

One coeval colleague of Mylius, Wolfgang Caspar Printz, establishes an apt metaphor involving food in his *Musica modulatoria vocalis* (1678). When describing the *requisita* of a good singer, he calls *Figuren* (a synonym for *Manieren*) the "salt of the melody":

> We now arrive at the eighth requisite of a good singer, that is, the science and the gracious execution of musical figures, which are, so to speak, the salt of the melody. Like unsalted food, a melody without figures is also scarcely agreeable.
>
> *(Printz 1678: 43; my translation: L.M.)*

As salt is an essential element of cooking, this metaphor suggests that ornaments are also an essential part of a good performance. However, the immoderate use of embellishments, especially passaggi, would be as deplorable as no use thereof, exactly as too-salty food and food with no salt are both hardly edible. In his *Kurze doch deutliche Anleitung zu der lieblich- und löblichen Singekunst* (1704), Johann Georg Ahle refers to a spurious quote by Renaissance composer Josquin Desprez to attack those performers who add coloraturas where the composer did not indicate them:

> You ass, why do you add a coloratura here? If I liked that, I would certainly have written it myself. If you want to correct well-composed pieces, write your own and leave mine uncorrected.
>
> *(Ahle 1704: 80, in Butt 1994: 141)*

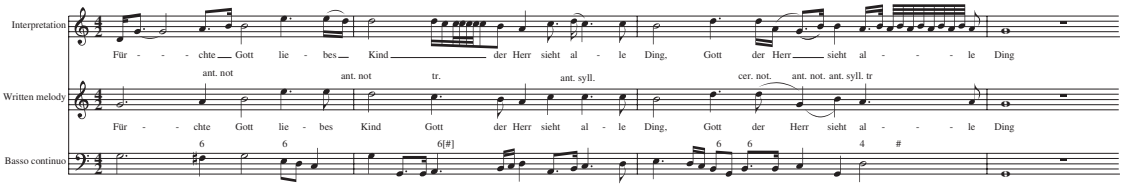
However, this quote should be properly contextualized. Firstly, the quote may refer to polyphonic music, in which ornamentation of the individual vocal lines was admitted but required a careful coordination between the different parts: as Bovicelli's *Regole* (1594) highlights, singers have to "listen carefully to the movement of the other parts" when embellishing their own melodies (Aamot 2000: 22). Misuse of coloraturas in polyphony was, therefore, more dangerous than in solo vocal music. Secondly, the quote concerns coloratura singing and, thus, refers to *cantar passaggiato* instead of *cantar sodo* (singing with the small graces mentioned above, such as *anticipazione della sillaba* and *della nota*, *cercar della nota,* etc.). The use of the latter was never questioned; moreover,

Interpretation
Written melody
Basso continuo
Für - - - chte Gott lie - bes Kind der Herr sieht al - le Ding, Gott der Herr sieht al - - - le Ding
ant. not
ant. not
tr.
ant. syll.
cer. not.
ant. not. ant. syll. tr
Für - - chte Gott lie - bes Kind Gott der Herr sieht al - le Ding, Gott der Herr sieht al - - - le Ding
6
6
6[#]
6
6
4
#

Figure 23.3 Musical example from Wolfgang Mylius, *Rudimenta Musices*, Gotha: Brückner, 1685: 109.

it was considered fundamental to a good performance. Johann Mattheson also issues an appeal to singers for the addition of ornaments, in his well-known treatise *Der vollkommene Capellmeister* (1739). Mattheson was a central figure in 18th-century musical discourse: he was not only a composer, music theoretician, and critic but also a singer. In his most important treatise on composition, he claims that the mere rendition of written notes is no more than a first reading of the score, undoubtedly not a performance:

> Thus we turn particularly to the actual and proper knowledge of a skilled singer which teaches how one is to conduct his voice gracefully and in the most agreeable way. I say "of a skilled singer," for singing properly according to the provided notes and beats is done in the primary school. In Italy there are just as many skilled in singing as we have in reading. Here we no longer deal with more basics, knowing the notes and the intervals, but with completely different things.
>
> *(Mattheson 1739: 110, translation in Harriss 1969: 406 f.)*

Even when speaking about more complex ornaments, Mattheson argues for the autonomy of singers and instrumental players against those composers who "according to the newest mode" put *tirades* (coloratura passages filling intervals) "in every symphony and aria, whereas such ornaments should be left to performers":

> A short time ago people were so frightfully enamored with this ornament that the composers writing in the most recent fashion would construct almost no aria or symphony in which they did not use like figures frequently and explicitly, considering that it should be left to the choice of the singer or player and his discretion. The composers must deal somewhat frugally with like things in so far as they do not want to arouse any aversion.
>
> *(Mattheson 1739: 117, translation in Harriss 1969: 426)*

Unlike Manieren, these free ornaments should be used sparingly to avoid disgust (Ekel) in the listener. In conclusion: in the course of the 17th and 18th century, German vocal didactics developed a dichotomy between small graces and coloraturas. The former – cantar sodo in Bernhard's and Mylius' treatises – are necessary to the performance from its very beginning; the latter, coloraturas, are more radical modifications of the melody that should generally be used when repeating a melody. This dichotomy will become even clearer in the second part of the 18th century.

4 "Essential" Graces vs Variations

While Mattheson still relies on the late 17th-century categorization of ornaments – he offers a systematized version of preexisting classifications – a new approach to defining "essential" ornaments can be found in German treatises from 1750 onwards. Frederick the Great, a passionate lover of arts and music and himself a flutist and composer, collected at his court the crème de la crème of the composers available in that geographical area: the two brothers Carl Heinrich and Johann Gottlieb Graun, Frederick's flute teacher Johann Joachim Quantz, and František Benda (Henze-Döhring 2012). Following the example of the Dresden court, Frederick initiated an Italian opera court, inaugurated with Carl Heinrich Graun's *Cesare e Cleopatra* (1742). In this context, Frederick also stimulated the publication of several treatises addressing different instruments: flute (*Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen* by Johann Joachim Quantz, 1752), keyboard instruments (*Versuch über die wahre Art des Clavier zu spielen* by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, 1753); and voice (*Anleitung zur Singkunst* by Johann Friedrich Agricola, 1757). The latter was not in fact a new treatise but a "rewriting" of Pier Francesco Tosi's *Opinioni de' cantori antichi e moderni* (1723),

one of the few Italian vocal treatises of that period. Tosi's *Opinioni* had a tremendous international impact, as its translations into Dutch (Alençon 1731), English (Galliard 1743) and German (Agricola 1757) testify. Agricola profoundly intervened in his translation through the addition of lengthy footnotes and musical examples that adapted the original text to the needs of the new audience; thus, a pamphlet written by a retired castrato against the new compositional and singing style became a didactic manual *ad usum Delphini*.

However, Agricola's *Anleitung* is not the only Berlin publication dealing with vocal ornaments: Quantz's *Versuch* mixed instructions for the flute with more general issues regarding the voice as well, e.g., the eleventh chapter on "The good instrumental and vocal performance" ("Vom guten Vortrage im Singen und Spielen überhaupt"). Recent research has provided evidence that Agricola might have in fact ghostwritten the *Versuch* or considerable parts of it (Jerold 2016). This would explain the similarities between both treatises concerning the existence of two different levels of ornamentation. Quantz contraposes "arbitrary variations" (*willkührliche Veränderungen*) and "small essential graces" (*kleine wesentliche Manieren*). The latter includes appoggiaturas, a sort of simplified version of the *Accentus*: they are made of one, two, or three notes, and can be added either at the beginning of the note or after it (Figure 23.4).

In his treatise, Quantz explains the use of essential graces vs the use of arbitrary variations:

> In performance appoggiaturas […] are both ornamental and essential. Without appoggiaturas a melody would often sound very meagre and plain.
>
> *(Quantz 1752: 77, translation in Reilly 2001: 91)*

> It is not enough to be able to play the different types of appoggiaturas with their proper values when they are marked. You must also know how to add them at the appropriate places when they are not indicated.
>
> *(Quantz 1752: 80, translation in Reilly 2001: 96 f.)*

> Variations must be undertaken only after the plain air has already been heard; otherwise the listener cannot know if variations are actually present. A well-written melody, which is already sufficiently pleasing in itself, must never be varied, unless you believe it can be improved.
>
> *(Quantz 1752: 120, translation in Reilly 2001: 139)*

Quantz clarifies that, while variations are necessary only when performing a melody the second time, the essential graces such as appoggiaturas are fundamental to the whole of the piece in order to avoid an insipid performance. In his treatise, Agricola enumerates the situations in which appoggiaturas can contribute to improving the performance:

> The performer's purpose in providing some notes of the melody with appoggiaturas is either (1) better to connect the melody, (2) to fill in the movement of the melody when it seems somewhat empty, (3) to enrich the harmony and make it even more diverse, or, finally, (4) to impart to the melody more liveliness and brilliance.
>
> *(Agricola 1757: 59, translation in Baird 1995: 92)*

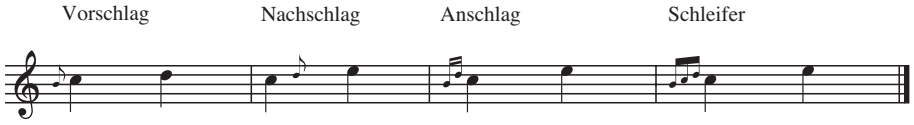



Figure 23.4 Musical examples from Johann Joachim Quantz, *Versuch einer Anweisung die Flöte traversiere zu spielen*, Berlin: Voß, 1752, passim.

These rules may question the composers' authority, as singers are allowed to improve melodies deemed not to have been appropriately composed. Agricola takes this position later in his book as well: though composers often write melodies elegantly, they can nonetheless be further improved:

> I have mentioned above that appoggiaturas may serve to fill in something seemingly empty in the movement of the melody. Were it quite empty, the composer is truly in error since, if he possesses good taste, he has already introduced the necessary appoggiaturas and other essential ornaments into the design of his melody and imagined their execution within within the framework of the whole piece. It is unthinkable that he should not seek to express his thoughts as clearly as possible. One must be able to distinguish whether it is necessary or not to fill in an emptiness and consider that a thing that is beautiful may, by degrees, become even more beautiful.
>
> *(Agricola 1757: 74, translation in Baird 1995: 107)*

This definition would be quoted verbatim in several treatises until the mid-19th century, which testifies to Agricola's influence on German didactics. The reason why appoggiaturas are so essential is further clarified by another central figure in German vocal didactics, Johann Adam Hiller (1728–1804). In the chapter on appoggiaturas of his *Anweisung zum musikalisch-zierlichen Gesang* (1780), Hiller cites Agricola's aforementioned quote, prefacing it with an explanation that appoggiaturas are no more than accents that highlight some syllables:

> In considering what was said about accents in the previous chapter, it becomes apparent that all musical ornaments are essentially accents and actually should be used to emphasize certain notes and syllables. If one pays attention to their application, nature, and characteristics from the point after a note to the longest melismatic extension, then one will be convinced of the above statement. In the past, appoggiaturas were already called accents, which is still the practice in France. Mattheson also refers to them by that name in *Der vollkommene Capellmeister.* Nevertheless, aside from accentuation, additional reasons for appoggiaturas can be given. Agricola lists four reasons.
>
> *(Hiller 1780: 34, translation in Beicken 2001: 72)*

According to Agricola's concept, the beauty of a melody can be improved "by degrees," a task that can be fulfilled through the addition of "necessary appoggiaturas and other essential ornaments." A further degree of beauty is created by the arbitrary embellishments sung when a melody is repeated the second time. The existence of different layers of ornamentation is perfectly visualized through the superposition of several staves in *Gründe der Kuhrpfälzischen Tonschule* (1778) by Georg Joseph Vogler (1749–1814). Of particular interest is the chapter on singing (*Singschule*) in which he explains different types of ornaments. As a practical musical example, he chooses his own aria "O laß mich hier zu deinen Füßen," composed for the oratorio *Die Auferstehung Jesu* (1777) (see Leopold 2002). Vogler rewrites this aria for soprano and keyboard instrument for pedagogical reasons (Figure 23.5).

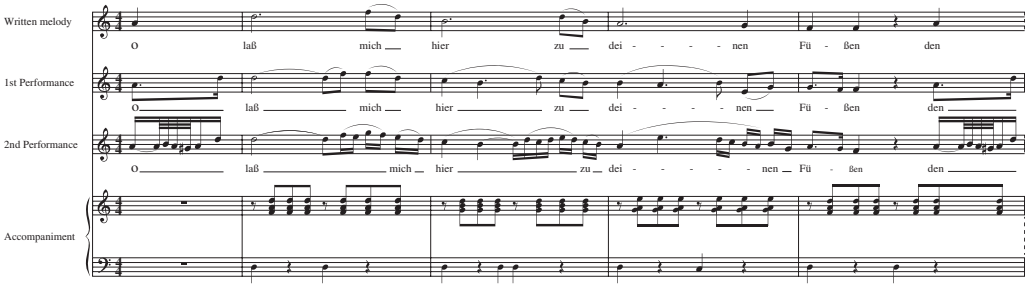
The score presents five staves, three for the voice and two for the keyboard accompaniment; the first three are respectively for the original melody, the performance of the A and B section, and the performance of A' (da capo). While the second line presents only essential graces (appoggiaturas of different types, *anticipazioni della nota*, etc.), the third one adds some coloraturas that create a significant difference with the original melody on the first staff. Musicologist Paul Corneilson has argued that this musical example "provides a model for composers to write their own embellished vocal lines" and at the same time "helps kapellmeisters teach their singing students how to improvise tasteful ornaments at sight (or by ear)" (Corneilson 1998: 102). However, "Vogler does

Written melody
O laß mich hier zu dei - - - - nen Fü - ßen den
1st Performance
O laß mich hier zu dei - - - - nen Fü - ßen den
2nd Performance
O laß mich hier zu dei - - - - nen Fü - ßen den
Accompaniment

Figure 23.5 Musical example from Georg Joseph Vogler, *Gründe der Kuhrpfälzische Tonschule in Beispielen*, Mannheim, 1778, Table XII.

not address the interesting question about whether or not ornaments should be written out by the composer or improvised by the singer" (Corneilson 1998: 102). Although Vogler does not explicitly address that question himself, it must be observed that in his oratorio, he does not notate the essential graces that he includes in the version for the *Singschule*: thus, it can be inferred that it was the duty of the singer to add both essential graces and variations.

5 The End of Essential Ornamentation in the 19th Century

This dichotomy between essential and arbitrary ornaments, so typical of 17th- and 18th-century performance, would gradually disappear in the 19th century, a shift reflected in the terminological confusion that characterizes German treatises of the early 19th century, as the dichotomy between *wesentliche Manieren* and *willkührliche Veränderungen* was gradually lost. In his *Musikalisches Lexikon* (1802), violinist and composer Heinrich Christoph Koch tries to give a general definition of the *Manier*. He first relies on a pre-existing distinction between *Setzmanieren* (written down by composers) and *Spielmanieren* (used by performers):

> The general sense of the word includes all embellishments of the main notes of a melody, or the different types of figures resulting from the mixture of the main notes with harmonic neighbour notes, passage notes and alternating notes. Generally, however, ornaments are understood to be certain figures that the composer uses to embellish a melody, divided into compositional and performance ornaments. The difference between the two types is still unclear. The compositional ornaments are those written out in the score with a determined form […]. By contrast, the performance ornaments are usually not written out in notes and are thus not part of the measure: they are either marked with special signs or with small notes not belonging to the measure, which the performer of solo parts also uses in those parts of the melody where the composer did not expressly mark them. These performance ornaments, also called arbitrary embellishments of the melody, are, so to speak the spicy component of the melody.
>
> *(Koch 1802: 927 f; my translation: L.M.)*

Koch considers essential graces part of the composition, while arbitrary embellishments (*willkürliche Auszierungen*) are only added by performers. This point of view is confirmed when he distinguishes between solo and tutti (or ripieno) parts. In fact, only soloists can allow themselves to improvise ornaments, while ripieno performers (who perform the same part together) need to play or sing their part in exactly the same way:

> In the strict sense of the word, the term *Manieren* signifies those embellishments of the melody that the performer of a solo part adds without prescription of the composer and that are called

> *broderies* in French. […] When performing a ripieno part, it is absolutely necessary to comply with all ornaments that the composer has prescribed. When performing a solo part, by contrast, the habit favors the arbitrary use of such *Manieren*, and when they are used, especially in an Adagio, their use is often so mannered that the actual melody written by the composer becomes unrecognizable.
>
> *(Koch 1802: 927 f; my translation: L.M.)*

The use of the French term *broderies*, which corresponds to coloraturas, makes clear that Koch means variations and not essential graces. In the 19th century, the former dichotomy between essential graces and variations, as established by Quantz, Agricola, and Hiller, slowly dissolves. The contrast between essential and arbitrary gradually flows into a distinction between written and unwritten. Christian Gottfried Nehrlich (1802–68), director of the *Gesangsconservatorium* in Berlin, wrote a singing treatise (*Die Gesangskunst*, 1853) in which he distinguishes between ornaments written by the composer and ornaments created in the moment (Nehrlich 1853: 272). As he had clarified in another previous writing (Nehrlich 1844), both embellishment types are adjectives related to the word "coloratura," which previously defined only variations. Nehrlich distinguishes between "standing" (*stehende*) and "free" (*frei*) coloratura. The first style is written down and is derived from the second, improvised style. Nehrlich distinguishes between the two for the following reason:

> Die Ersteren gingen aus den Letzteren dadurch hervor, dass diejenigen der willkührlichen Verzierungen, welche sich allgemeinen Beifall erworben hatten, anfingen von den Componisten in ihren Compositionen angezeigt zu werden. Den Grund dazu fanden die Componisten in dem Umstande, dass, nachdem die Coloratur durch grosse Sänger geschaffen war, ein Haufen blinder Nachahmer grossen Missbrauch damit trieb.
>
> *(Nehrlich 1844: 92)*

> The arbitrary embellishments, which were generally applauded, started to be written out by the composers in their works. The composers based their decision on the fact that those coloratura had been invented by great singers and there were plenty of blind imitators who misused them.
>
> *(my translation: L. M.)*

In Nehrlich's opinion, the inability of a significant number of singers to properly improvise ornamentation led to composers claiming their authority over essential graces, changing both the use and categorization of vocal ornaments. In those years, another pedagogue, Friedrich Baumann, ideated a similar dichotomy between "free" (*freie*) and "given" (*gegebene*) embellishments (Baumann 1859: 106). The latter include appoggiaturas and the usual other graces, which are now only prescribed by composers and deciphered and executed by interpreters. Singers' freedom is limited to coloraturas, which are required less and less in mid-19th-century vocal repertoire, and which survive in vocal treatises as an example of how to vary a melody. A severe attack on arbitrary embellishments came not from a composer but from a singer and vocal pedagogue – in his *Gesanglehre* (1866), Franz Hauser considers it not only useless but also dangerous to allow singers excessive liberty:

> There are certain prejudices and mistakes, in art as well as in life, that are transmitted from generation to generation and cannot die off – at the utmost, they can be replaced by new ones. One of the most curious and incomprehensible is the arbitrariness with which musical works can be treated by performers; and surprisingly, this is practiced within a sort of system

> and teaching […]. Is there any art, be it painting or poetry, in which this were even slightly allowed? When a painting is copied, a theater piece is staged, etc., could one proceed in the arbitrary way that singers allow themselves? […] If a work is the product of a gifted person, it has spirit and organic life; why should it be modified and embellished? If it is a stillborn and empty work, it should stay where it is; it is not worthy at all to be listened to.
>
> *(Hauser 1866: 90; my translation: L.M.)*

Hauser's inability to recognize the role of improvisation in arts such as poetry and theater is as questionable as his denying it a role in the art of singing. This firm resolution against the use of arbitrary embellishments is the result of a new conception of composing vocal music, one in which the performer's contribution is no longer considered essential. It is interesting to note that Hauser uses the same word, "arbitrariness" (*Willkür,* now negatively connotated), that had characterized *passaggi* since the mid-18th century and that was opposed to the essentiality of graces. The way of interpreting a composition had changed, as Hauser explains by quoting Jean-Jacques Rousseau:

> Quelle doit être la grande attention du musicien dans l'exécution? C'est sans doute d'entrer dans l'esprit du Compositeur, et de s'approprier ses idées pour les rendre avec toute la fidélité qu'exige le goût de la pièce.
>
> *(Hauser 1866: 90, from Rousseau 1743: 83)*

> What should the great care of the Musician be while performing? Doubtless to enter into the mind of the Composer and to appropriate his ideas in order to render them with all the fidelity which the taste of the Piece requires.
>
> *(translation in Rousseau 1998: 82)*

Hauser explicitly says that the duty of the performer is "to render the work of the master, as it was thought and written down, with sense and comprehension thereof" ("das Werk des Meisters wie er es gedacht und geschrieben mit Sinn und Verständniss wieder zu geben"). The key to this "performance turn" is the identification of the work with the written notes: Hauser relies on the score as a faithful depository of the thoughts of the composer and the spirit of the composition. This approach anticipates the dominant concept of *Werktreue* (fidelity to the work) in the 20th century and the "authenticity of intention," according to Kivy. However, the historical evidence derived from vocal didactics of the previous centuries shows the *inauthenticity* of this approach in performing early solo vocal music. Until the late 19th century, singers were considered sort of co-composers and were not only permitted but even required to improve a melody first through the addition of essential graces and secondly by varying repeated material. Essential ornamentation is thus the result of improvisation – though at a lower degree when compared to the higher one of variations – and at the same time an "authentic" performance element as a "task of all soloists," as Kivy remarks. However, essential ornamentation is neither limited to High Baroque music nor is it exclusively related to variations. It concerns a broader chronological period that embraces the whole 18th century and the early 19th as well, and it deals with graces more than with coloratura singing.

In conclusion: vocal performances of historical repertoire before 1900 not only allow but even require improvisation – at different degrees and in different forms, as explained above – in order to sound authentic. This authenticity is not linked to the intentions of the composer, because performers were entitled to choose and freely use ornaments in addition to those already written in the score. Although the contemporary understanding of the word "ornament" is something that is optional today, in the 17th and 18th century the addition of these ornaments by the performer were considered "essential," as the written melody was only a draft of the musical idea. "Essential

ornamentation" was, therefore, not an oxymoron until, in the late 19th century, performers became the mere executors of the composer's will, expressed and fixed through the score. Thus, in order to revive an authentic approach to the music of the past, singers today should learn to diverge from the written score from the very beginning of the performance by improvising essential ornaments. In so doing, they would not act against the composer's will; on the contrary, they would create a "personally authentic" performance (Kivy 1995: 130) that – by the means of improvisation – follows the historical performance practice of that time.

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24

FREEDOM AND FORM IN PIANO IMPROVISATION IN THE EARLY 19TH CENTURY

Katrin Eggers and Michael Lehner

Determining the significance of improvisation in current classical music culture is easy. With very few exceptions, it is simply nonexistent. Pianists play compositions from the past (on rare occasions, even from the recent past) within a well-established, near-ritualistic concert setting. And they play those pieces as flawlessly and as close to the score as possible. Even passages with an improvisational background, such as the cadenzas in a piano concerto, are usually performed in written-out versions that have been memorized note by note.

The notion that classical piano music should be so strictly bound to the letter of its score is actually a rather new development, historically speaking. The importance of improvisation for keyboard players only began to decrease in the early 19th century, despite the fact that it had been regarded as a crucial ability for every professional performer until then. Our modern recital culture emerged over the ensuing decades (Hamilton 2008: 33–71), with improvisational elements completely disappearing from standard concert formats in the 20th century. This is a remarkable development, if we consider that improvisation had in earlier times often marked the climax of a recital, as can be seen in announcements, program sheets and reviews of concerts by Felix Mendelssohn, Franz Liszt and others (Sità 2019: 17 f.). Along with this shift, playing by heart became the new standard, which encouraged the gradual disappearance of extempore skills. It is worth noting that the effect of reproducing complex pieces without the score is similar to that of instantaneous improvisation. When the practice of playing from memory emerged in the 18th and early 19th centuries, some commentators regarded it as treacherous and dishonest (Felbick 2019: 42 f.). Nor did the practice apply only to complete compositions. Memorized snippets of existing pieces can also be put together in a collage that then sounds like a newly improvised piece. Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach was reputedly one of the greatest keyboard improvisers of his time, and he distinguished between a fantasia that "emerges from a good musical soul" and one that "consists of passages learned by heart or of stolen thoughts [welche] […] in auswendig gelernten Passagien oder gestohlenen Gedanken bestehen]" (Bach 1753: 123).

After a brief historical overview of improvisation and its development, we will here consider how and why it went out of fashion, and how this connects to an underlying aesthetic and to cultural tensions between freedom and form – the very factors that make improvisation so special.

This shift in improvisation practice occurred for various reasons. Professionals had not necessarily needed an exactly notated score before, but by the early 19th century, an increasing number of amateurs among the bourgeoisie were learning to play the piano and required a large repertoire of music that was notated precisely. Parallel to this development, it seems that composers became determined to fix their written score, thereby "solidifying" it into a "work of art" by reducing the

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number of liberties available to the performer in terms of added notes, embellishments, dynamics, tempi and so on (this issue is of crucial importance to the present chapter). We can observe this gradual process by taking even a cursory look at the piano scores of C. P. E. Bach, Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven. Bach's works require one to fill out the voices now and then when they are indicated by a figured bass; Mozart's piano music sometimes has passages in a skeleton score that needs to be transformed into a lively, ornamented musical line. Beethoven's music marks a turning point in this regard. His early piano works are still in the older tradition, but over the course of his career he tends more and more to give precise performance indications. The beginning of the repertoire culture and the increasingly virtuosic demands of 19th-century piano music required a great deal of time for practice. This resulted in a gradual process of alienation between the composition and instrumental performance or reproduction. Clara Wieck-Schumann is a representative example of this. At the age of 36, when her husband died, her compositional activities came to a standstill (Reich 2001: 211–48), after which she became one of the most influential figures in creating the modern repertoire for pianists. She incorporated more and more historical works in her concert programs, contrasting and combining them with piano music of her time.

1 Decline and Distrust

The Classical era was the last epoch when improvisation at the keyboard was both a common practice and regarded, to some extent, as a basic skill for every professional performer. Furthermore, the requirements made on a virtuoso, and the complexity of the extempore fantasias expected by an audience became extremely demanding. Carl Czerny (1791–1857), a Viennese pianist, composer and well-known piano teacher, is an interesting figure who can exemplify these historical developments and their context and impact on the relationship between freedom and form, improvisation and written composition. In his treatise *Systematische Anleitung zum Fantasieren auf dem Pianoforte*, op. 200 of 1829 (Czerny 1983: 3), he describes improvisation as a "special obligation and a crown of distinction [Pflicht und Zierde]" for every keyboard virtuoso. But by the time of his *Pianoforte-School* op. 500 just ten years later, he had already reduced the significance of improvisation to two small chapters, dividing it into "preluding" and "extemporaneous playing." Here, improvisation is merely a "highly interesting and honorable art," and a virtuoso need only possess this ability "at least to a certain degree," even though "he may not possess any decided talent for the art" (Czerny 1839: 124). Czerny's contemporary Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778–1837) offers us another prime example of why the first three decades of the 19th century may be regarded as a highpoint of piano improvisation. Several reports of his performances confirm his audience's amazement at the complexity of his extempore playing, which constituted what was regarded as "composing in the moment." In the second edition of his treatise *Ausführliche theoretisch-practische Anleitung zum Piano-Forte-Spiel* of 1830, he added a final chapter on extemporizing. Unlike Czerny, he stated right at the beginning that: "Actual instruction on this matter can neither be given nor received" (Hummel 1830: 461). Improvisation had, thus, been transformed from a necessary skill that every performer had to master into a subject that one should at least know about, and finally into a gift that a virtuoso either possesses or does not (with Hummel naturally being one of the few who still possessed it). In the final passage of his piano school, he states with a certain degree of nostalgia that while many pianists are interested in mere "entertainment and dexterity," even playing well from the score would never "nourish" the mind in the way that free improvisation can, even if the performer in question has only a modicum of skill (Hummel 1830: 468).

But the times were changing, and Hummel's generation was no longer in charge. Just twenty years later, Robert Schumann (1810–56) was already warning young musicians of the danger of improvising too much. Only the "solid signs of the script" guarantee the "mastery of form," he says, and he insists that they should "write more than [they] improvise" (Schumann 1854: 303).

Schumann's negative view of improvisational skills proves that there were also aesthetic reasons for the disappearance of a culture of improvisation, above and beyond the reasons already given above. In its openness and freedom, improvised music began to be regarded as amorphic and lacking "the power of a clear structure," in Schumann's words. The excitement of witnessing something exceptional and unrepeatable has now turned into a distrust towards an unshapen, inconsistent musical performance.

This did not come from nowhere, because aesthetic shifts are usually a complex cultural matter. Certain prominent figures in the Age of Enlightenment already harbored suspicion towards improvisation, such as Johann Christoph Gottsched (1700–66). He focused initially on the meaning of the term "fantasieren" (an expression that until the late 19th century was far more common in treatises than its synonyms "improvisieren" or "extemporieren"). This term does not have an exact English translation, and has a twofold meaning: "to fantasize" on the one hand, and simply "to improvise" on the other hand. The word thus already implies the significance of imagination or creative power, though Gottsched in fact draws attention to its more dubious equivalent: "Phantasiren" is like dreaming, being a product of the imagination while sleeping or having a "high fever" that occurs "without the observation of an adequate reason." That is why artists – Gottsched mentions painters, poets and composers – would only create "monstrosities" ("Mißgeburten") if they relied on it. Such products might be called "waking dreams," and he uses terms like "grotesque" and "unbalanced [ungereimt]" when describing them (Gottsched 1733: 224; this passage is discussed in Felbick 2019: 52).

These arguments about the dubious value of improvisation, thus, began in the 18th century, were reinforced by Schumann and others of his time, and remained important in the 20th century. Allegations of a lack of form, of unity and of careful planning run through the anti-improvisation arguments of numerous figures from Schumann to Theodor W. Adorno and Carl Dahlhaus.

2 Mere "Improvised Effects" vs. Compositional Complexity

Criticism of improvisation in Classical music is always about form. The analytical problem seems to concern the relationship between the form as a whole and its individual sections, and how details can shape a complex form and provide structural balance. Structural complexity and motivic-thematic development are still the analytical cornerstones for understanding music of the Classical and Romantic periods, and are – to a certain extent – regarded as instruments for determining the aesthetic value of a musical work. In order to demonstrate how this discourse has become as influential as it lacks historical awareness, we shall take a brief look at the arguments of the philosopher Theodor W. Adorno and the musicologist Carl Dahlhaus.

For Adorno, the temporal dimension that composed music is capable of bringing before our eyes and ears can only be conceived within the frame of literacy. In comparing music to painting, he claims that: "Highly organized music is impossible without notation; the historical difference between improvisation and composed music is identical to the qualitative difference between what is articulated loosely and what is stated in binding fashion" (Adorno 1978a: 632). It is already revealing that he offers a simple distinction between improvisation and composition, understanding the latter exclusively as written music, though this is historically incorrect (as we shall see below). He argues that the role of "real improvisation" had always been "excessively overrated" in history (and his understanding of "history" had its limitations) because "great music still speaks to us today […] since improvisation retreated to make room for the fixed work of art with its unambiguous text" (Adorno 1977: 806). Elsewhere, he claims that "the second half of the 18th century was able to eliminate improvisation step by step without any loss in favour of authentically notated scores" (Adorno 1973: 94). In concrete historical terms, it is his advocacy of formal complexity that lies behind his rejection of improvisation, for he claims (quite incorrectly once again) that

even in the Baroque basso continuo tradition, "improvisation became restricted to ornamenting the harmony, without ever intervening in the musical substance" (Adorno 1977: 807). He goes on to state that "whatever memory […] survives of it in certain fantasies of Viennese Classicism is notable for its lack of motivic-thematic dynamism" (Adorno 1978b: 517). A similar approach was taken by Dahlhaus, though with more musicological detail. For him, differentiated forms only originate in written compositions, while improvisation is necessarily focused on details (Dahlhaus 1987: 268 f.). He states that

> Improvisation tends to become a potpourri of isolated stimuli, a succession of momentary effects. Either the overall form and basic design is crudely schematic and externally prescribed, or it is of no consequence and left to chance. A form which is both differentiated and unschematic, and which is nonetheless clear and comprehensible – the aim of compositions with artificial ambitions – can hardly be attained by means of improvisation.
>
> *(Dahlhaus 1987: 270)*

While every element should be carefully and equally developed in composed music, improvisation has to focus on one single feature. It is thus able, according to Dahlhaus, to create surprises or exciting moments, but unable to treat all the other musical elements in an equal way: "everything else, being a mere foil, remains conventional and formalised" (Dahlhaus 1987: 269). Like Adorno, Dahlhaus takes 18th-century fantasies into consideration. Here,

> it is harmony that departs from the norm and that transgresses the rules of regulated voice leading by means of abrupt chord changes or peremptory dissonances which seem like rents in the musical tissue. Melody on the other hand is not developed.
>
> *(Dahlhaus 1987: 269)*

So in his view, even in the genre of the fantasia, the very name of which is rooted in the idea of freedom and immediateness, nothing really new can be invented that goes beyond temporary effects, because form and melodic development cannot be built on effects alone. Of course, Dahlhaus has a point. It is obvious that during the creative process of developing and writing down musical ideas, a level of complex differentiation and relatedness can be achieved that is by no means possible in a spontaneous realization at a keyboard. But it is striking how he denies improvised music the general capacity of doing so, and insists that it is incapable of creating something that is artistically new. However, we must bear in mind the status of musicology at the time. Historical musicology, which is traditionally based on philological methods and research into written sources, found it difficult to deal with a historical culture that cannot easily be stored in a library. With Dahlhaus, this two-century-old, negative understanding of the historical and aesthetic value of classical improvisation came to a preliminary halt. It has since been corrected by musicians and researchers in the field of historical performance practice.

We shall, nevertheless, focus on two issues touched upon by Adorno and Dahlhaus, because they can help us see the bigger picture. The first is the relationship between improvisation and composition, which is not as clearly characterized by a simple division as Adorno claims (the same applies to the terminology used for each); the second is the relationship between freedom and form that Classical treatises, in fact, consider extensively, as we shall see.

3 Improvisation and Composition in Historical Documents

Historical sources for the techniques and aesthetics of improvisation at the piano offer us three pairs of oppositional concepts. The first is the conflict between freedom and form, which deals

with the relationship between single moments of performance and their overall coherence. The second is rarely mentioned directly; it is the constant process of negotiation between individuality and conventionality. The third is how the improviser's mind oscillates between intuition and reflection.

We shall begin here with Carl Czerny's definition of improvisation:

> When the practicing musician possesses the capability not only of executing at his instruments the ideas that his inventive power, inspiration, or mood have evoked in him at the instant of their conception but so combining them that the coherence can have the effect on the listener of an actual composition (Tonstück) – this is what is called: Improvising or Extemporizing.

He continues to write that the "talent and the art of improvising" means to spin out

> at the spur of the moment […] each original or even borrowed idea into a sort of musical composition which, albeit in much freer form than a written work, nevertheless must be fashioned into an organized totality as far as is necessary to remain comprehensible and interesting.
>
> *(Czerny 1983: 1)*

4 Freedom and Form

Although Czerny differentiates between "fantasieren" and "actual composition," he states that if the improvisation is executed in masterly fashion, it might (and should) sound as if we are listening to a composed piece. He later even calls the result "a sort of musical composition." As we saw before, Czerny marks a turning point at which the modern concept of composition begins to be understood strictly as a written work. Before that, even in the early 19th century, this separation was by no means a given. As Felbick has recently observed, the older understanding of composition did not exclude spontaneous execution, as we can see from terms like "Composition extemporanea" or "comporre all'improvviso" (Felbick 2019: 39–49). Rather like Arnold Schoenberg's famous remark that the process of composing can be regarded as a "slowed down improvisation" (Schoenberg 1976: 69), the classical sources stress the link between extemporizing and writing music, though they do so from the opposite perspective, understanding spontaneous musical creation as "componere" in the moment, in real time. With regard to their effect on the listener, "freedom" and "construction" do not simply signify improvisation and notated composition respectively. For example, there are passages in Hummel's composed-out *Fantasia* op. 18 whose 18 quasi-improvisational fluidity and sudden musical gestures and tonal surprises seem much freer than the fantasias in Czerny's op. that he wrote specifically to demonstrate the process of improvising. Since these are all notated and published, they naturally cannot be regarded as actual improvisations. But unlike Hummel, Czerny wrote his pieces as pedagogical examples, not with the aim of creating a fixed work of art. His stated aim is to depict a realistic situation that might mirror extempore practice, carefully restraining the editorial process so that the emerging music may constitute "censored protocols" of his playing (Czerny 1993: XII). Hummel's piece, on the other hand, is based on complex structural planning that could not be achieved through ad-hoc invention. For instance, complete sections in Hummel are repeated several minutes after their first appearance, whereas Czerny states that "Repetitions are hardly possible while improvising, because the music one has just played rarely remains so long in the memory" (Czerny 1993: 55). However, there are exceptions to the rule. At the beginning of this chapter, we mentioned that playing by heart, without a score, can seem like an extempore performance. But there are cases that can invert cause and effect; Beethoven reputedly had such an extraordinary capacity for memorization that he was able to repeat an entire improvised fantasia immediately afterwards, without

any changes (Kopitz and Cadenbach 2009: 10). If this report is true, would an improvisation that is repeated identically still merit the title of "improvisation"? (Dahlhaus argues against this; cf. Dahlhaus 1987: 268). Or ought we rather to refer to it as a memorized piece that has not yet been committed to paper? And if Beethoven had in fact "composed" the piece in his head in advance of playing it, would it even be an improvisation at all? The ultimate question to ask here is: if the performer is excessively talented, as it were, does improvisation then automatically constitute instant composing?

Czerny's examples are, nevertheless, much closer to a realistic improvisational approach in that they avoid recapitulation and limit repetition to direct iterations, though he follows sonata form and a "logical" development of his themes by using a "construction kit" comprising several models and patterns. According to Czerny, a successful improvisation is similar to a notated piece in that it needs to be "fashioned in an organized totality." Later, he uses an architectural metaphor for this. While a "well-written composition" may be compared to a symmetrical edifice, "a fantasy well done is akin to a beautiful English Garden, seemingly irregular, but full of surprising variety, and executed rationally, meaningfully and according to plan" (Czerny 1983: 4). Daniel Gottlob Türk (1750–1830) offered a similar description of improvisation, namely, that it constitutes "apparent disarray" (Türk 1789: 312).

It is significant that Czerny's descriptions often underline the dichotomy between a lack of form (in terms like "surprising variety") and coherence ("rationally," "according to plan"), not in order to play them off against each other, but instead to balance them out. Musical freedom is for him the key feature of every improvisation and, therefore, needs space, while also needing to be contained to some extent. He does not explain precisely how that might work, but we can trace these ideas in the fantasias he offers to illustrate what he writes (as discussed in greater detail below). Opinions differed on how to even out these two extremes. Sources from the early 19th century often warn of a lack of coherence, though Türk's piano treatise of 1789, published one year after the death of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach, remains closer to the idea of the "Freye Fantasie." He seeks both "unity" ("Einheit") and "diversity" ("Mannigfaltigkeit"), both being equally important: "This is why a cadenza should include as much as possible that is unexpected and surprising" (Türk 1789: 311 f.). Too much unity ("Einheit") might lead to monotony ("Einförmigkeit"), which is one of his major concerns when it comes to improvising a cadenza.

Hummel's piano school – published at roughly the same time as Czerny's treatise – also discusses this topic, and offers greater detail about the dangers of freedom and how to counter them when practicing. Dahlhaus's abovementioned concerns ("potpourri of isolated stimuli" and "melodic underdevelopment") were already well known and much discussed Hummel's day. Rather like Czerny, Hummel also warns against playing merely a sequence of "constantly new, peculiar, beautiful ideas," because one's inventiveness must, rather, be contained by a "firmer sense of order" (Hummel 1830: 465). For him, the main problem ("Hauptübel") is the ephemerality of the principal musical ideas that arises from the human mind's lack of concentration and the capacity to memorize. But Hummel regards these skills more like a muscle that can and must be trained. This is why only an experienced performer (thus, Hummel) should start an improvisation without due preparation. He otherwise recommends first repeating and memorizing the theme(s) on which the improvisation is to be based, then trying out assorted variations, ornamentations and imitations on the instrument before starting the improvisation proper. The performer's capacity for recollection is, thus, crucial if he is to avoid playing a series of unconnected effects.

5 Individuality and Conventionality

Besides preparatory exercises, Hummel suggests another "cure" for the problem of creating order. For this, he frequently uses the term "noble direction." Rather than suppressing creativity,

"common forms, sequences and phrases of strict style" are just a means of guiding ideas in an orderly manner (Hummel 1830: 465). Of course, Hummel is here also referring to the fact that all improvisational practice is, in some way, Janus-faced. On the one hand, it is guided by regularity, by patterns, sequences and phrases that have been learned and that together form a repertoire of musical "ready-mades" for improvisers. The more of them they know and are able to vary and combine, the more diversified and interesting the performance will be. On the other hand, the unpredictability of performance can result in un-plannable moments of bliss – unheard-of harmonic progressions or turns of phrase – that might go beyond the norms of the time and that are derived from the individuality of the performer and the uniqueness of an unrepeatable situation. Several reports of C. P. E. Bach's extemporizing underline how he made just such an impression on his audience. Boundaries that one would not cross in notated music may be crossed on the spur of the moment and are, therefore, linked to the ephemerality of performance. In his final statement in his piano tutor, Hummel stresses the link between what is not regulated and the performer's "most personal individuality" ("eigenste Individualität") and "inner self" ("innerstes Wesen") (Hummel 1830: 468).

The regular and the irregular may occur successively, such as when a meandering chromatic passage is followed by a well-known sequential type; we often find this in composed-out fantasias too, as in Mozart's K. 475. But they can also be superimposed and interact with each other at the same time. Typically, some elements will be fixed by the choice of a model such as a chromatic bass line, regardless of whether such a model is chosen spontaneously or planned in advance. Such templates can determine the succession of musical events, thereby letting improvisers focus their attention on something else. This leaves a broad spectrum of expressive possibilities to the moment, such as harmonic progressions, figurations and the shape of the melody. In this sense, established patterns provide a guide or skeleton for the improvisation, while at the same time remaining open to substantial harmonic change or enhancements such as chromaticism and alternative metric versions.

6 Intuition and Reflection

There is another aspect to this that directly links up with the contemporary concept of "creative genius." The underlying question here is: is one playing, or being played? (for more on this issue, see: Eggers and Stollberg 2021). The creative process during the act of performance is described by several sources as a state of unconsciousness, with invention being something intuitive rather than a product of reflection. Musical art proceeds in time and, thus, needs to span a comprehensive, meaningful, temporal course. Czerny describes this ambivalent situation as follows:

> By extemporizing we are to understand that the performer, on the impulse of the moment, without preparation, and often also without reflection, plays something that we might say comes spontaneously under his fingers, and which nevertheless possesses to a certain degree all the properties of a written composition, meaning that melodies and brilliant passages alternate in a tasteful or elaborate manner.
>
> *(Czerny 1839: 124)*

But to achieve this, one has to be in clear command of the general intent and direction of the piece. Türk underlines the first, "unconscious" aspect. Like Gottsched, he uses the metaphor of a dream, but not in a nightmarish sense: "It might not be improper to compare the cadenza with a dream." When dreaming, he writes, we are often able to "relive within just a few minutes actual events we have experienced and that made an impact on us; we experience them most vividly, but without any connection between them, and without any clear sense of consciousness"

(Türk 1789: 312). In this metaphor, the whole movement represents real life, while the cadenza represents reliving that life unconsciously in a dream. This comparison between improvising and dreaming is a very common one, and can also be found in 19th-century sources. Czerny similarly describes this state of mind as an "almost subconscious and dream-like playing motion of the fingers" that succeeds all the better if the performer does not anticipate too much, "just as the orator does not think through each word and phrase in advance" (Czerny 1983: 43). This state of being truly in the moment is one of the most common ways of describing improvisation at different times and in different disciplines. It places an emphasis on the key attribute of subjective freedom that provides the basis of an ephemeral experience of art that no predefined process can offer us. The most famous such example is Beethoven's remark, made on sketches held today in the H. C. Bodmer collection:[1] "One improvises only when not paying attention to what one plays, surrendering oneself unconstrainedly to what crosses one's mind – this would also be the best and most truthful way to improvise in public, too." But significantly, the very same source of this famous comment includes sketches and notes for improvisations as well. Clearly, from time to time even Beethoven did not take the risk of extemporizing without preparation, at least when he was performing before a large public. But the above quotation should not be mistaken as some kind of ideal that even he could not attain, because the statements we have also quoted from Türk (over twenty years earlier) and Czerny show that preparing for an improvisation was generally regarded as a valid approach. As contradictory as these two concepts might seem at first, they have to be brought together and linked to the other two dichotomic pairs: mediating and alternating freer passages and preplanned musical materials not only provides variety while guaranteeing an equilibrium of freedom and coherence, but also allows the performer to slip into that "intuitive" state of mind. When employing an overall structural design, it is possible for improvisers to control when to leave it and when to return to it; the orientation provided by the overarching design ensures that they do not lose themselves in the state of rapt contemplation that Hummel regarded as the principal danger when extemporizing.

7 Large-Scale Structures: Improvisation and Double-Function Form

The relationship between improvised and written music is manifold and variable. They are, in practice, inseparable – or at least linked directly to each other – and they are also regarded as opposing principles of musical invention. For Czerny, however, sonata forms (i.e., guided motivic development) and improvisation are not oppositional concepts. On the contrary, the sonata provides the basis for his improvisational concepts, as can be seen in his exemplary fantasias. We can observe similar trends in the composed fantasias of the same period, such as Hummel's Fantasia op. 18, a work that was well known at the time and that Czerny himself recommends for further study (Czerny 1993: 63). These pieces deviate from the older, more rhapsodic types of the 18th century that were situated in the tradition of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. Mozart's contributions to the genre still followed this older type, in particular his Capriccio in C major, (K. 284a), which in part dispenses with a time signature, and his two famous Fantasias in d minor (K. 397) and c minor (K. 475). The latter was published together with the Sonata in c minor K. 457 and was intended as a contrasting, written-out, but quasi-improvisational introduction to it, and therefore avoids any hint of sonata form itself. But in the early 19th century, the two genres of fantasy and sonata became increasingly similar until they reached the point of interchangeability, as is evident from a famous remark by Robert Schumann: "So write sonatas or fantasias (it's not about the name), but meanwhile do not forget the music" (Schumann 1839: 134). What is noteworthy here is that there was a mutual process of interaction between these two concepts. Formal designs adopted from written music were used to structure improvised music in a well-balanced dramaturgy, in order to provide the listener with a guide and orientation points, especially in

long performances. But compositional innovation was also influenced by improvisational practice, because the latter promoted opening up established schemata, freer progressions and more open formal concepts (such as we find in Beethoven's two Sonatas op. 27, both marked "quasi una fantasia"). There are numerous reports of piano improvisations lasting thirty minutes or longer during the Classical period, especially in the case of Beethoven. By applying a preplanned format to an improvisation, a performer could create large-scale forms that were diverse yet consistent, and adhered to the tonal concepts of the time, stupefying an audience with an ad-hoc performance full of subjectivity and unexpected turns yet within a regular, familiar structure.

If we take a closer look at Czerny's op. 200, we can conclusively prove Adorno and Dahlhaus wrong in their refusal to acknowledge the ability of improvisation to create new forms. Czerny proposes that performers should practice working out every type of individual movement extempore. In addition to allegro movements in sonata form, he proposes training the ability to improvise rondos, scherzi, variations and slow movements – in fact, all the individual movements of a sonata. The principal theme ("Hauptthema") must be followed by a subsidiary melody ("Mittelgesang"), i.e., the second subject, which must then be concluded with a cadence in the "tonality of the dominant" ("Dominanttonart"), or on either III or V in minor pieces. While the dualistic understanding of two contrasting themes already reflects the innovations of Beethoven's sonatas, the option for minor keys shows that Czerny's concept of sonata form is, partly, an older one. By the late 1820s, this was already outdated. He also understands the sonata as a bipartite form, writing that the first part is followed by a second (the development and recapitulation) that lets you "surrender [yourself] to the freest imagination [der freyesten Fantasie] and fulfillment of ideas and to all sorts of modulations, imitations, etc." (Czerny 1983: 51). The development section thus offers greater room for free figures and musical ideas, though one should not recall the previous song-like sections ("Gesangsstellen"), and must ultimately return to the main key. This last instruction does not apply to combinations with other movement types; such combinations are the goal of a large, multipartite fantasia. Czerny admits that this kind of improvisation is "the most difficult of all" (Czerny 1983: 52). In this case, the sonata form breaks off just before the recapitulation and modulates into the key of the following section. Czerny's examples show this strategy mostly by approaching the main key, but then avoiding any stabilizing cadence and instead shifting towards a new key (e.g., Ex. 42, bars 65–76; Czerny 1993: 46). The overall structure of a fantasia that combines different genres is described rather cursorily:

> One might begin with Allegro, for example, develop it for some length of time, then proceed into an Adagio or Andantino, interweave it with a fugal section and with the kind of modulatory section discussed in the first chapter, and conclude with a lively rondo.
>
> *(Czerny 1983: 52)*

Czerny's concept of a continuous form consisting of single, connected movements combines an opening sonata movement with a slow movement and a concluding rondo. This corresponds to a three-movement sonata but with an additional section or transition consisting of "modulation passages" at the end of the Adagio. At least in terms of its tonality, this can, thus, also be understood as a large-scale sonata form with two contrasting themes, a development section and a rondo in the place of the final recapitulation. Czerny's description can be read as a so-called "double-function form," which musicologists have usually assumed began with Liszt's tone poems for orchestra and his one-movement piano pieces in the mid-19th century (Newman 1969; Hamilton 1996: 28; Rosenblatt 2002: 281–307; van de Moortele 2009: 20).[2] This formal type is found in the development of Romantic orchestral and piano pieces, and associated with an increase in complex compositional planning that is achieved by superimposing two distinct formal strategies. One common explanation of its origins is the blending of the single-movement overture

in the tradition of Beethoven with multipartite tone poems or program symphonies (Altenburg 2001: 19). This assumption fits the beliefs of influential thinkers such as Adorno and Dahlhaus that innovation in musical design is linked to sketching and planning works on paper. Research into compositional sketches ("Skizzenforschung"), especially in Beethoven's case, is regarded as the most promising way of approaching the origins of musical creation and invention. But that might well be misleading, at least in this case. Instead of deriving double-function form from Liszt's compositions, we might assume another origin, based on our observations of Czerny's op. 200, namely, that the improvisation of these large-scale, multipartite fantasias ultimately became a model that was transferred to piano and orchestral compositions during the period when the genres of sonata and fantasia drew closer together. This supposition is supported by the fact that Liszt (who was a pupil of Czerny, *nota bene*) wrote several piano fantasias in the 1830s (mostly based on operas, what Czerny called "potpourri"), thus well before the compositions of his Weimar period. He was also widely acclaimed for his stupendous art of improvisation at a time when that ability had already lost its mandatory significance for a virtuoso. We also know that Liszt was very impressed by Franz Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*, which inspired him to create a version of it for piano and orchestra (op. 15, Catalogue Searle 366). Schubert's Fantasy, the improvisational roots of which are already alluded to in its title, is an early notated example of the formal type described above; it is also one of the few examples of a printed fantasia on a single theme, consisting as it does of thematic sections with transitional, impromptu passages, almost exactly as Czerny describes in his fourth chapter. A closer look at the two model Fantasias in Czerny's op. 200 reveals that he uses the formal design he prescribes, but in four movements like Schubert, not in the three he himself stipulates. As already mentioned above, there are several indications that these pieces are provisional in character and that suggest further possibilities for extension or alternative solutions. We can see this in the way Czerny deals with repetitions. For long stretches, he repeats motives or themes as a means of providing unity, though he never repeats entire phrases. He avoids one of the most powerful tools for creating formal unity, namely the recapitulation of the main sections. Instead, his focus is more on tonal coherence. He turns the final rondo into a tonal recapitulation (in Ex. 42 it is in the related major key) and presents it as an approximation to the basic motif of the opening allegro movement. In the first Fantasia, the reappearance of the dotted motif of the first section is transformed into an ascending *Romanesca* sequence (G^7 –C–B^7–e minor), a common sequential pattern in music of the 18th and 19th centuries (Gjerdingen 2007: 25–44). In the second example, the main motif starting with a rising fourth is moved to the bass in the final section.

Thanks to these two features – tonal and motivic reappearance – the outer movements frame the whole piece, with the final rondo sections assuming the function of a recapitulation, as defined by double-function form. The modulating transitions are very similar to the development section in a sonata, and their appearance right before the final rondo emphasizes its recapitulatory effect. But in both examples, Czerny switches the place of the scherzo and adagio sections, which weakens the function of the slow movement as a secondary subject group in a large-scale sonata form. In this regard, his written description of a fantasia is more coherent that his actual example. His main idea is still to offer a sequential series of different types and genres connected by transitional (often virtuoso) passages. The examples he offers in the ensuing chapters show how great were the possibilities for providing variety. Nevertheless, his goal is still a fantasia that builds up an "orderly totality, one in which unity and a distinct character can prevail" (Czerny 1983: 52). Czerny's pieces represent a prototype that later became the double-function form in large-scale compositions (with Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy* a case from Czerny's own time).

To sum up, improvisation was historically understood as a craft that could be learnt, albeit an extremely demanding one, and that enabled a performer to compose in the moment. Its ultimate ambition can be seen as achieving an equilibrium between moments of bliss and unexpectedness and the subjectivity of the performer, on the one hand, and coherence, comprehensibility

and creating a meaningful unity, on the other. Of course, these two principles sometimes come into conflict with each other – emphasizing the first weakens the latter, and vice versa. But in general, Classical improvisation was guided by the musical aesthetics of its time, and aimed to achieve balance and resolution. To meet these high standards as a performer, however, required a time-consuming process of practice that was no longer viable in the virtuoso culture of the 19th and 20th centuries.[3]

Notes

1 Sammlung Bodmer, HCB Mh 75, Bl. 3r (digitalized and online at: https://www.beethoven.de/de/media/view/6362106559463424/scan/4?fromArchive=5736895317278720 (accessed November 11, 2020).
2 Rosenblatt interprets his works of the 1830s as compositions written in double-function form, for instance, his *De profundis* of 1834/35 (Rosenblatt 2002: 302)
3 Many thanks to Chris Walton for proofreading this article.

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25

IMPROVISATION AND AUTHENTICITY IN EARLY 20th CENTURY WESTERN MUSIC

Andrew Wilson

> The observation of previous limitations leads to the possibility – as if on its own – of doing things differently. Or better – who could tell?
>
> *(Niklas Luhmann)*

1 Introduction

There is growing evidence that some musicians affiliated with early 20th-century modernism engaged in forms of improvisation as a mode of composition, as well as a means of performance. For instance, Erwin Schulhoff (1894–1942), the Czech composer and virtuoso pianist of German-Jewish descent, composed works such as his *Zehn Klavierstücke* of 1919 that explicitly rely on the performer's interpretive freedom (possibly actualized at the moment of performance) for their realization. He was also a celebrated improviser. For his part, the American composer Otto Luening (1900–96) wrote a piece in 1923–24 that shares strong similarities with post-1950 examples of open form. While he is mostly remembered for his experimentation (together with Vladimir Ussachevsky) with tape composition and extempore playing in the early 1950s, Luening's skills in improvisation can be traced back to the early 1920s. Schulhoff's two musical examples discussed in this chapter are *Sami Dva* (*Only Two*), a 1933 recording of the Czech musician's jazz-oriented piano duos, and *Optimistische Komposition*, a transcription of a solo polymodal extemporization on two themes performed in Ostrava in 1936. Luening's example is *Part IX*, the last part of his *Trio for Flute, Violin, and Soprano* of 1923–24. All three case studies are perceived as improvisational documents, defined in similar terms as Michael R. Sitton's understanding of the concept (Sitton 1987). Moreover, they are examples of some of the forms of improvisation that can be observed in the first half of the 20th century.

According to Sitton, a document can be designated as improvisational when other contemporaneous sources validate its perception as a form of improvisation. In accordance with this, I acknowledge sources that might justify the improvisational status of a document because they link the performer, or performing composer, to a praxis that draws on a knowledge base derived from an established improvisatory tradition. In my case, however, musical sources include not only manuscripts and scores but also audio recordings (e.g., Schulhoff's performance of *Sami Dva*). I further differ from Sitton's definition in that I also rely on distinctions made by the science of art music in the second half of the 20th century to differentiate musical works of art (in an emphatic sense) from other realizations that do not fulfill the demands of the work concept. Within this construct, such realizations are, by default, perceived as forms of improvisation. They comprise

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not only practices affiliated with an identifiable improvisatory tradition but also forms of rapid composition, open forms, and music generated by chance. They equally cover musical productions (or productions that include music) that are meant to be experienced as a single and exclusive event rather than as a realization of a predefined work (Wilson, forthcoming).

Observing and analyzing improvisational documents in Western music of the 1900–50 period that are neither categorized as examples of authentic African American jazz or of the French organ school remains a challenge due to the relative scarcity of *hard evidence*.[1] This difficulty is further amplified by the ongoing claim in scholarship that the practice of improvisation as an aesthetically (or artistically) relevant form of music-making had died out circa 1840 (Wangermée 1950; Moore 1992; Gooley 2016). According to this discourse, musicians from the first decades of the 20th century could no longer draw on an improvisatory tradition, one that in earlier times had been cultivated and passed on from one generation of musicians to another. Yet extempore playing in (Western) art music contexts re-appeared in the second half of the 20th century. It is a phenomenon that is mostly viewed as being a by-product of the post-1950 experimentation in (allegedly) new modes of music-making such as indeterminacy, aleatory techniques, or open form, with which improvisation is sometimes (controversially) associated.[2] In its various forms, improvisation has since become an expected component of most music schools' curriculum.

The conceptual framework favored in this text is derived from Ernst von Glasersfeld's understanding of a radical constructivist view of science and notions drawn from Niklas Luhmann's systems theory (Glasersfeld 1995, 2001; Luhmann 2000). It does not seek to define improvisation in ontological terms. Nor does it question the legitimacy of regarding improvisation as a unified concept. It does, however, perceive the historiography of improvisation and the description of improvisation's forms as academic constructs that remain in a relatively stable experimental state as long as they are viewed as viable (rather than either true or false). In what follows, I will first outline the conceptual framework that characterizes my work and that facilitates a rational observation of past forms of improvisation from a present-day viewpoint. I will then analyze the three case studies. Finally, I will briefly discuss some of the challenges that emerge when confronted with the seeming paradox of observing forms of music-making that should not exist according to our current history of improvisation, the demise of improvisation in art music contexts being generally situated in the middle of the 19th century.

2 Conceptual Framework and Terminology

My work is based on a constructivist model of improvisation and its history. In this model, past, present, and future observations of improvisation in scholarship are understood as knowledge derived from valid academic methods and forms of philosophical reasoning.[3] These observations constitute a diversity of legitimate points of view that can contribute to the re-actualization of our current perception of modes of improvisation. While radical constructivism does deny "that we can rationally know a reality beyond our experience" (Glasersfeld 2001: 10 f.), it allows us the possibility of examining how the said phenomenon (i.e., what scholars isolate in their observations) has been and can be observed. This approach facilitates the analysis of how modes of perception (of a phenomenon such as improvisation) might have evolved. It also helps identify whether certain recurrent characteristics can be isolated. This is achieved by way of second-order observation (Luhmann 2000: 54–101; 2008: 213 f.) which not only focuses on what is observed but also on how (and why) the object of inquiry is perceived and distinguished by the observer. Whereas scientific theories are seen (in radical constructivism) as viable models that help order and manage the domain of experience, these models are constantly revised and replaced by novel conceptual constructs. In turn, this process re-actualizes the validity and accuracy of scientific observation.

The use of the term *medium,* and its conceptual sibling *form* in this chapter, is derived from Luhmann's specific terminology (Luhmann 2000: 102–32). Accordingly, "a medium consists of elements in 'loose coupling' that can take on forms in 'strict coupling'" (Moeller 2006: 221 f.). It is a distinction that is only observable as a form. For instance, a word, a sentence, or a spoken utterance are actualizations (forms) of the medium language. Strictly speaking, a medium in Luhmann's systems theory is a construct that presupposes "a specific system reference" such as the "art system" (Luhmann 2000: 103).

In the present model, the medium of improvisation (i.e., the medium *improvisation*) presupposes a difference between two system states: that which is improvisation and that which is not improvisation, the latter being understood as the musical work of art concept (i.e., *das musikalische Kunstwerk*) in the tradition of Carl Dahlhaus (1996) or Lydia Goehr (1992). Since around 1950, the brand of musicology defined here as "the science of art music" or *Musikwissenschaft als Kunstwissenschaft* (Janz 2013: 56–81) has perceived post-1800 compositions (in Western art music) as the result of a time-consuming process and the outcome of deliberate elaboration. From this perspective, a *Tonkunstwerk* is fixed in writing and attributed to a single author. While a composition must be "an in-itself closed, individual musical form," its score must also be in-itself complete so that its interpretation (by one or more musicians) can reproduce audible realizations of its form (Dahlhaus 1979: 10 f.). In addition, what has been elaborated and notated is the essential part of the aesthetic object that takes form in the consciousness of the listener.

The science of art music's focus on the work concept between the 1950s and the so-called cultural turns of the 1970s also explains its inability to observe forms of improvisation around and after 1900. Such realizations have remained beyond its field of vision as they are unrelated to its academic concerns (Wilson, forthcoming). At best, they have been perceived as irrelevant exceptions or remnants of archaic music practices incompatible with the object quality that art music compositions are said to have finally gained in the 19th century. On the other hand, this historically derived understanding of the musical work as an embodiment of the concept of aesthetic autonomy as a Classical-Romantic category has contributed to the renewal of the medium of improvisation by facilitating the emergence of a variety of differentiable forms.[4] A sufficient conceptual shortcut is to perceive the medium of improvisation as a virtual cloud of loosely coupled elements that constitute an unobservable mass of potentialities (i.e., virtualities). When actualized in strict coupling, a form communicates its difference that might be observed as a realization of one of the variants of improvisation whose own defining attributes do not comply with one or more of the musical work's features. These features are directly related to the *Tonkunstwerk*'s marked differentiation between composition, interpretation, and music reception (Wilson, forthcoming).

3 Forms of Improvisation

The difficulty of perceiving improvisation as a unified concept or practice is a recurrent topic in new improvisation studies. Bruno Nettl, for instance, has argued that (in music) the phenomena labeled improvisation form a constellation of types of creativity. It might have been preferable (he adds) if the term had never been invented (Nettl 2009: ix). Despite the lexical and conceptual thicket that invariably characterizes the observation of improvisatory practices as an emic phenomenon in Western culture (Blum 1998; Gushee 2009), four variants (or forms) of improvisation can be observed in art music contexts of the first decades of the 20th century. They are:

- Improvisation as a means of live performance in which the music generated is perceived as the result of the performer's (performers') capacity to improvise (variant I).

- Improvisation as a means of composition in which the work is perceived as a transcription of musical ideas either generated at the moment of performance (e.g., at the piano, mentally) or by chance (variant II).
- Compositions that explicitly frame and project themselves as a means of generating in performance ever-changing forms (variant III).
- Works that rely on artistic means and performative elements in order to create the illusion of a form of improvisation (variant IV).

While these variants are based on distinctions made in scholarship when observing past and present forms of improvisation (Feisst 1997; Fischer-Lichte 2014; Landgraf 2014), they are neither mutually exclusive nor do they necessarily embrace all potential realizations of (the medium) improvisation. If one wished to pair these four variants with forms of music-making since 1950, free improvisation as a mode of live performance (for example) would be associated with variant I. Examples of variant II would be modes of spontaneous and/or intuitive composition like Christian Wolff's *Exercises 1–14* (1973–1974) (Feisst 1997: 68). Variant III could be observed in Earle Brown's *Twenty-five Pages* (1953) (Feisst 1997: 99–102). A possible post-1950 example of variant IV would be Maurizio Kagel's organ piece *Improvisation ajoutée* (Jacob 2009: 12). However, variant IV is probably best epitomized by Max Reinhardt's theatrical productions of the early 20th century. According to Erica Fischer-Lichte, the artistic motivations of these productions were to generate unique and unrepeatable theatrical events whose "event-ness" (Fischer-Lichte 2014: location 1070–89 [Kindle edition]) was the result of the dynamic interaction between actors and audience (Wilson, forthcoming; Fischer-Lichte 1999, 2014).

Erwin Schulhoff's performance of *Sami Dva* (probably recorded in 1933), the transcription of one of his solo piano extemporization of 1936 entitled *Optimistische Komposition*, and the last part of Otto Luening's *Trio for Flute, Violin, and Soprano* of 1923–24 (i.e. *Part IX*) will be presented in detail in the next three sections as exemplifications of the variants of improvisation mentioned above. Although I observe Schulhoff's examples primarily as realizations of variant I and Luening's *Part IX* as an instance of variant III, my analyses of the musical case studies also show that the four variants of improvisation are neither mutually exclusive nor necessarily representative of all potential forms of the medium i*mprovisation*. Furthermore, as improvisational documents, *Sami Dva*, *Optimistische Komposition*, and *Part IX can* be distinguished from other known early 20th-century examples of extemporization. In contrast to such forms as Adelina Patti's vocal extemporizations in her 1906 recordings of Bellini's arias (Crutchfield 1983), or the improvisatory processes of the so-called historical avant-garde and their use of *bruitism, automatism*, and randomness (Goergen 1994; Toop 2016), Schulhoff's and Luening's examples emerged within the same musical contexts as those conventionally attributed to the historically and culturally constructed concept of the musical work of art as defined by the science of art music (Wilson, forthcoming). Moreover, the musical materials used by Schulhoff and by Luening (especially in *Optimistische Komposition* and in *Part IX*) are related to those employed in *composed* (i.e., the result of time-consuming elaboration) works of art music of the period.

Improvisation can always be staged, cited, or faked (Landgraf 2014: 93). In the case of *Optimistische Komposition*, for instance, Schulhoff might have only pretended to improvise. Similarly, when playing *Part IX*, the violinist, the flutist, and the singer might decide to hide from the audience the fact that their rendition of Luening's work is not the result of decisions taken in the moment of performance but an interpretation of a form they have rehearsed and memorized. From this angle, both cases could be analyzed as examples of variant IV in the above-mentioned classification of forms of improvisation (i.e., works that rely on artistic means and performative elements in order to create the illusion of a form of improvisation). Nevertheless, the claim that Schulhoff's examples (i.e., *Sami Dva* and *Optimistische Komposition*) and Luening's *Part IX*

can be analyzed as improvisational documents – in the sense of variants I – is based on various sources. In Schulhoff's case, these sources include testimonies of contemporaries who either witnessed (or took part in) his improvised performances, a 1933 interview in which Schulhoff explains his approach to improvisation in *Sami Dva*, the recording of *Sami Dva* itself, and his transcription of his performance of *Optimistische Komposition*. For Luening, the main sources are the manuscript and the published variant of his *Trio for Flute, Violin, and Soprano. Part IX* is also briefly discussed in his autobiography (Luening 1980). While more conjectural, a number of additional arguments contribute to the viability of this construct. Firstly, both Schulhoff and Luening were taught by virtuoso composer-performers – Max Reger and Feruccio Busoni, respectively – known for their proficiency in improvisation (Anderson 2004; Knyt 2010; 2017: 28). In addition, various testimonies suggest that improvisation was far more common in the first decades of the 20th century than previously thought. For instance, Claude Debussy, Déodat de Séverac, Isaac Albéniz, Ricardo Viñes, Gino Tagliapietra, Frederick Delius, Percy Grainger, Wilhelm Kempff, Emil (von) Sauer, a student of Franz Liszt, and Karla Schramm are but a sample of the various musicians known for their skills in extempore playing (Wilson, forthcoming). Secondly, and as in earlier times (Bellotti 2017), improvisation – whether as a means of performance, composition or pre-composition – remained perceived as a complementary and integrated aspect of music-making in treatises on extemporization published after 1900, such as A. Madeley Richardson's *Extempore Playing: Forty Lessons in the Art of Keyboard Composing* (1922), Gerhard F. Wehle's *Die Kunst der Improvisation* (1925–26), or Marcel Dupré's *Traité d'improvisation à l'orgue* (1925). Extempore playing also continued to be an acknowledged practice among German-speaking musicologists such as Hugo Riemann and Arthur Wolfgang Cohn, or composers like Hans Pfitzner. Thirdly, a number of composers including Schulhoff and Luening, as well as Leo Ornstein, Dane Rudhyar, or Henry Cowell, appear to have experimented with forms of rapid composition (Wilson, forthcoming). Bringing to mind contemporaneous experiments in automatic writing, Leo Ornstein even described his compositional process of the 1910s as a form of creativity unrelated to conscious control (Oja 2000: 15 f.; Wilson, forthcoming). Finally, one should keep in mind that Schulhoff, as well as Luening, were eclectic musicians interested in experimentation. Both had either witnessed or taken part in Dada actions and played improvised, jazz-like popular music (Wilson 2019 and forthcoming). Furthermore, their oeuvres can be attached to two important cultural phenomena of the post-World War I period – left-wing politics and *Neue Sachlichkeit* for Schulhoff; and, in Luening's case, theosophy combined with a deep commitment to the development of American musical modernism.

4 Analysis of Schulhoff's Examples

Schulhoff's piano performance of *Sami Dva* (*Only Two*) was recorded in 1933 together with Oldrich Letfus, one of his piano duo partners of the 1930s. *Optimistische Komposition* is the result of a solo extemporization performed in Ostrava in 1936, which he transcribed on paper a few days after the event (Gregor 1964: 100 f.; Wilson 2019). As previously mentioned, both examples are observed here as realizations of variant I (i.e., improvisation as a means of live performance in which the music generated is perceived as the result of the performer's (performers') capacity to improvise) even though they could arguably not only be perceived as instances of variant IV but also of variant II (i.e., improvisation as a means of composition in which the work is perceived as a transcription of musical ideas either generated at the moment of performance (e.g., at the piano, mentally) or by chance). This is most prominent in the case of *Optimistische Komposition* as its notated form has been performed and recorded by classical interpreters.[5] Contrary to other contemporary musical examples, whose designation as improvisational documents embodying a form of live improvised event might be questioned, for

instance, due to a lack of explicit testimonies referring to the musician's prowess as an improviser, the circumstantial evidence in Schulhoff's case is relatively compelling. This evidence includes reports mentioning his skills in improvisation written by musicians with whom he had performed (i.e., Oldrich Letfus, Jan Kalab). Other accounts refer to his capacity for playing from memory, sight-reading, and technical aptitude as a modern piano virtuoso (Wilson 2019), skills that are essentially similar to those attributed to musicians associated with earlier forms of keyboard extemporization (Sitton 1987: 25; Guido 2017: 2 f.).

Schulhoff's approach to music composition and performance embraced the period's latest tendencies, such as the use of extended tonality, jazz-influenced idioms, or, when interpreting works, a *sachliche* anti-romantic pianism (Wilson 2019). However, it remained based, at least in part, on pedagogical principles that favored a unity between theory and practice, as well as between composition, improvisation, and performance. According to Bellotti, these principles are typical of forms of "composition at the keyboard" that pre-date the alleged mid-19th century demise of improvisation (Bellotti 2017: 115). Schulhoff's capacity to improvise probably stemmed from his musical background and the type of teaching he received from known improvisers such as Max Reger and Franz Bölsche (Wilson, forthcoming). In Bölsche's case, it appears to have included systematic drilling, transposition, and memorization of harmonic sequences and modulatory passages. His teaching also combined figured bass realizations and harmonizations of choral tunes at the keyboard, exercises which are outlined in his *Übungen und Aufgaben zum Studium der Harmonielehre* (Bölsche 1918, first published in 1911).

4.1 Sami Dva

The most compelling evidence that justifies the perception of *Sami Dva* as an improvisational document is the recording itself and an interview published in 1933 in which the recording is advertised (see Uggè 1933: 9). In the interview, Schulhoff describes his extemporized piano duos as "an instinctive musical dialogue between himself and Letfus similar to the improvised performances of pure jazz bands."[6] These performances were also regularly broadcast live on Radio Prague (Wilson 2019). Nevertheless, due to the absence of the original score, which was composed by Schulhoff's partner Letfus, and the quality of the monophonic recording, it is difficult to assess exactly what might have been notated or memorized and what was generated at the moment of performance. The question remains open whether *Sami Dva*'s overall structure was modified from one performance to another, the piece being part of the duo's repertoire of improvised *Gebrauchsmusik* (functional music).[7] According to Schulhoff, and possibly in order to achieve the type of extemporized dialogue mentioned in the interview, each pianist was given an identical copy of the score. These copies were not arrangements for four hands but rather were notated as conventional two-hand piano pieces.[8]

Although *Sami Dva* is interspersed with interesting modulations and melodic/harmonic particularities (e.g., the use of the whole tone scale on F in m. 3 or the octatonic scale in the vamp's melodic line), it is strongly periodic and based on diatonic chord progressions. Rather than a 32 bar AABA song form, a common structure in American popular music by 1930, *Sami Dva*'s overall architecture (as audible on the recording) is characterized by a systematic use of contrasting sections that not only separates the piece's main melodies but also bring on variety.[9] Interestingly, the peculiarity of this structure becomes more transparent when one applies the nomenclature used by Alfred Baresel to describe jazz forms in his 1929 treatise *Das neue Jazz Buch* (Figure 25.1). Despite a lack of direct evidence, it is more than probable that Schulhoff knew the 1929 edition of Baresel's treatise. While *Das neue Jazz Buch* of 1929 includes excerpts taken from Schulhoff's Kunst-Jazz compositions, the Czech musician dedicated his 1926 *Toccata sur le Shimmy "Kitten on the keys"* to Alfred Baresel.

Sami Dva can be analyzed as a "so-called big two-part Lied form" (*sogenannte große zweiteilige Liedform*), which is, Baresel notes, the most suitable model for jazz forms (Baresel 1929: 76).[10] The reason given is that it favors multiple repetitions of one and the same part, and thereby allows the musician to display his art of variation, the latter being depicted as "what is expected does not occur" (*weil auf diese Art seine Variierungskünste* ("*was man erwartet, kommt nicht*") *am besten gezeigt werden können*) (Baresel 1929: 76). Moreover, variation in a Lied form (as described in *Das neue Jazz Buch*) can be generated through the use of "breaks," "optional endings," and "vamps," which are qualified as "the easiest improvisation exercises" (*[die] einfachsten Improvisationsaufgaben*) (Baresel 1929: 93), and whose features match the various transition passages in *Sami Dva*'s form. For instance, rather than some kind of second introduction, measures 5–8, (a variant of which occurs in ms. 85–8), can be analyzed as a realization of a "vamp" (Figures 25.1 and 25.2). According to Baresel, a "vamp' is a "free insertion" (*ein freies Einschiebsel*) of two measures – "the first on the tonic, the second on the dominant" (*Tonika und Dominante*) – which can be repeated and which first occurs after the introduction (Baresel 1929: 95).[11] More generally, the role of a "vamp," Baresel writes, is to prepare "the restatement [or resumption] of a melodic part" (*die Wiederaufnahme eines Melodieteiles*) (Baresel 1929: 95), a description that corresponds to the second occurrence of the vamp in ms. 85–8. To end their performance (ms. 165–6), Schulhoff and Letfus seem to have opted for an "optional ending' or "Tonika-Break," which Baresel qualifies as "a free ornamental ending, played instead of a calm, original ending" (*freie, auszierende Schlüsse, die an Stelle ruhiger Originalschlüsse treten*) (Baresel 1929: 95). In a similar fashion, the various transitions between "choruses" (in the sense of a theme which is repeated) are arguably best perceived as "breaks," defined in Baresel's treatise as "free virtuosic inserts, which replace dispensable original measures as ornamentation of a piece" (*freie virtuose Einlagen, die zur Ausschmückung eines Stückes an Stelle entbehrlicher Originaltakte gesetzt werden*) (Baresel 1929: 93). Accordingly, their function is to interrupt "the piece's ongoing melodic and rhythmic flow […] to either generate an unexpected transition prior to the repetition of the original melody or to produce an unexpected insertion" (*das Abbrechen des bisherigen melodischen und rhythmischen Verlaufes eines Stückes* […] *so daß ein unerwarteter Übergang vor Wiederaufnahme der originalen Melodie, oder überhaupt ein überraschendes Einschiebsel geschaffen wird*) (Baresel 1929: 93). Such an example can be observed in ms. 77–84 where the second theme is only played once, the customary b + b' structure being cut short (after eight measures) by the re-occurrence of the vamp. As Baresel points out, these interruptions of a melody are fully legitimate as long as they comply with the music's periodic structure (Baresel 1929: 93).

Mapping the modes of formal variation mentioned in Baresel's treatise on *Sami Dva*'s overall structure undeniably gives us a different perspective from which to observe the duo's jazz-oriented improvised performances, which can also be perceived as a form of improvisational novelty piano playing (Wilson, forthcoming). Nevertheless, as previously mentioned, the extent to which these variations emerged at the moment of performance or whether they were notated, pre-planned, or memorized is open to discussion. Also debatable is whether the variations of the melodic material – which, for instance, in the initial restatement of part A is doubled a sixth above the original melody (Figure 25.3) in the antecedent phrase – were the result of decisions made on the spot or were pre-arranged. The duo's models of improvisation seem to have also included agogic as well as melodic and rhythmic variations, variations that stay close to the notated material but possibly make use of non-chord tones. Equally perceptible are passages where one of the musicians adopts a comping role, playing countermelodies,[13] short riffs, etc., while the other remains focused on the melodic material. Particularly noticeable are the rhythmic fills in the second passage of part A (m. 89 ff.), one pianist performing repeated rhythmic figures (or riffs), the other playing the melody (Figure 25.4).

Intro	(4 ms.) Ms. 1–4			
Vamp ("Intro 2")	(2x2 ms.) Ms. 5–8			
A	**"erste Melodie" (with repeat)** **a + a'** (2 x 8 ms.) Ms. 9–24	**Break 1** (8 ms.) Ms. 25–32	**"erste Melodie" (with repeat)** **a + a'** Ms. 33–48	**Break 2** (4 ms.) Ms. 49–52
B	**"zweite Melodie" (with repeat)** **b + b'** (2 x 8 ms.) Ms. 53–68	**Break 3** (8 ms.) Ms. 69–76	**"zweite Melodie" (no repeat)** **b** (1 x 8 ms.) Ms. 77–84	**Vamp** (2 x 2 ms.) Ms. 85–8
A	**"erste Melodie" (with repeat)** **a + a'** (2 x 8 ms.) Ms. 89–104	**Break 1** (8 ms.) Ms. 105–12	**"erste Melodie" (with repeat)** **a + a'** Ms. 113–28	**Break 2** (4 ms.) Ms. 129–32
B	**"zweite Melodie" (with repeat)** **b + b'** (2 x 8 ms.) Ms. 133–48	**Break 3** (8 ms.) Ms. 149–56	**"zweite Melodie" (no repeat)** **b** (8 ms.) Ms. 157–64	
Coda	**Optional ending** (2 ms.) Ms. 165–6			

Figure 25.1 Erwin Schulhoff, *Sami Dva*, 1933. Overall structure – analyzed using notions mentioned in Alfred Baresel's *Das neue Jazz Buch* of 1929.

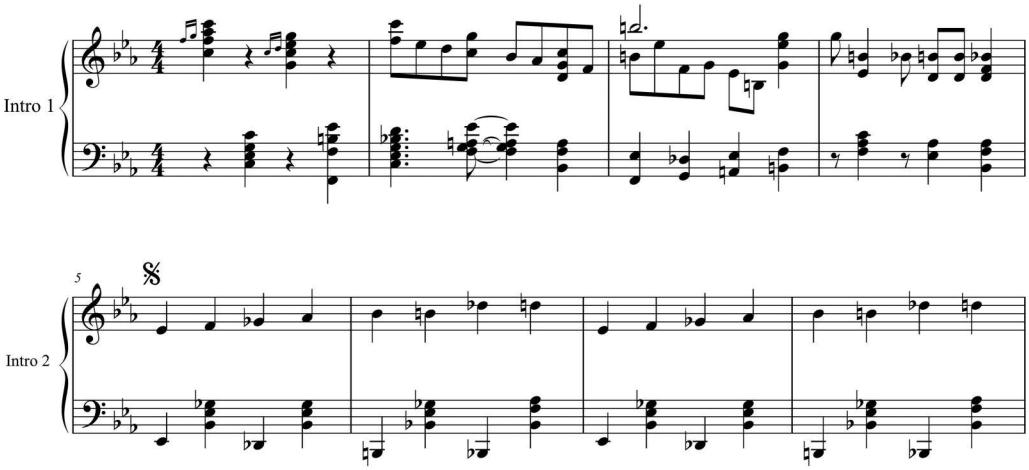



Figure 25.2 Erwin Schulhoff, *Sami Dva*, Measures 1–8 (introduction + vamp), as transcribed from the 1933 recording (transcription Andrew Wilson).[12]

4.2 Optimistische Komposition

Schulhoff's jazz orientated duo extemporizations, as realized in the recording of *Sami Dva*, are distinguished by a desire to generate a dialogue between the two performers and remain strongly periodic and harmonically driven by tonic-dominant progression. *Optimistische Komposition*, on the other hand, is the result of a solo improvisation built on two distinctive themes. It is representative of Schulhoff's aesthetic turn towards socialist realism in the 1930s. It is also believed to be the result of a *live* extempore performance that took place in 1936 at a workers' gathering in an Inn in Ostrava and which Schulhoff scored a few days after the performance. While this possibly suggests that the musical material was partially memorized, it also blurs further the distinction between composition and improvisation. The transcription of *Optimistische Komposition* was later regrouped under the title *Studie* together with *Der Marsch der Tschechischen Arbeiter*, another instance of Schulhoff's improvisations (Wilson 2019).

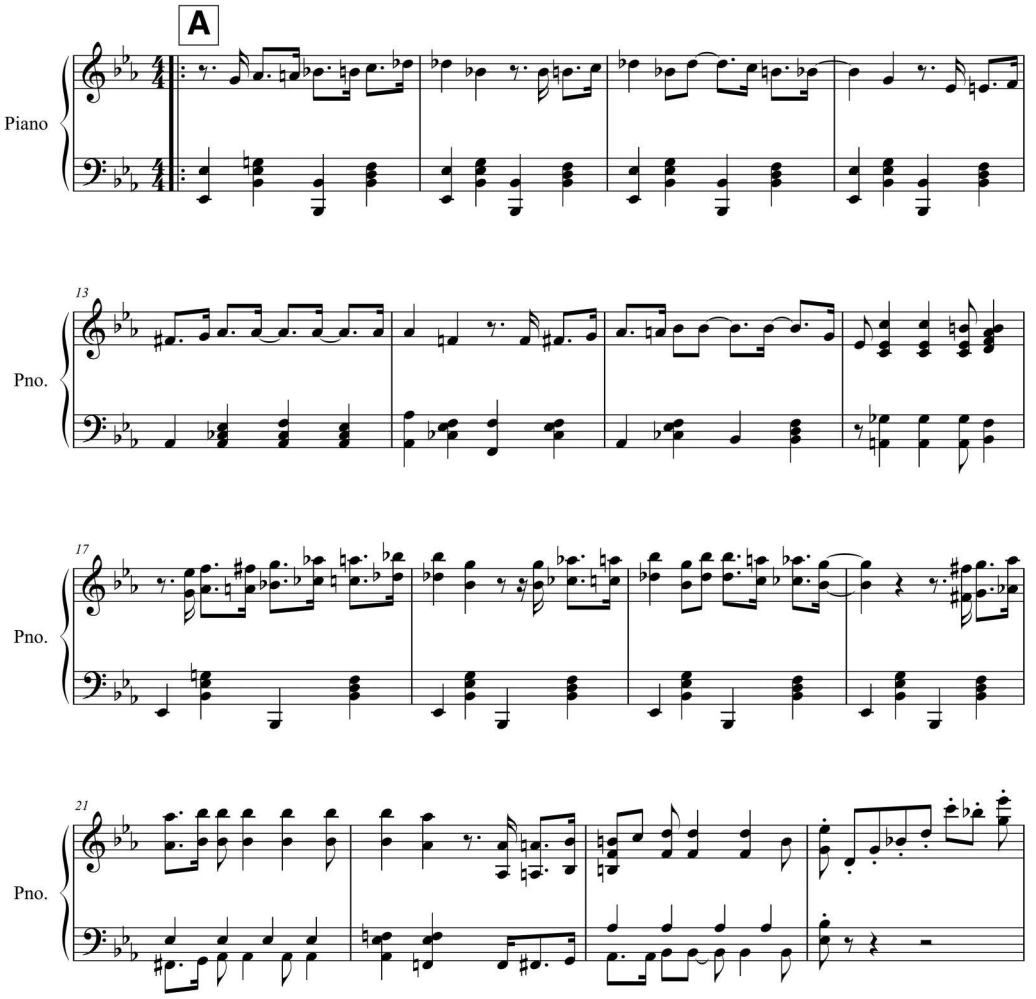



Figure 25.3 Erwin Schulhoff, *Sami Dva,* Measures 9–24 (transcr. Wilson).

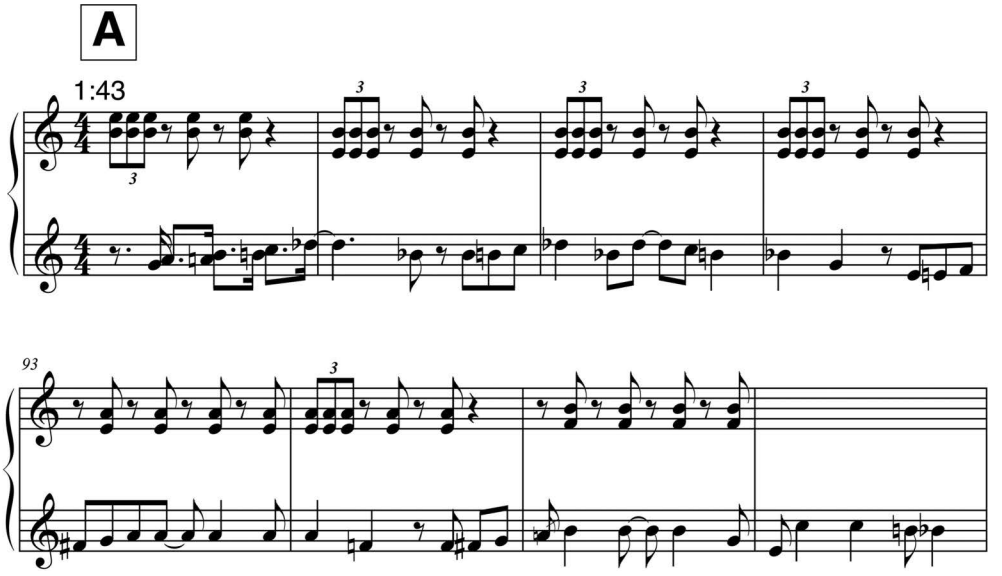



Figure 25.4 Erwin Schulhoff, *Sami Dva*, Measures 89–95 (transcr. Wilson).[14]

The capacity for generating music on the spot is often perceived as a process that relies on a knowledge base from which improvisers are said to draw. This knowledge base might include models, formulas, strategies, gestures, or points of departures that have been fully memorized and internalized and which the improviser can re-combine, transpose, vary, or oppose at the moment of performance (Nettl 1998: 13; Berkowitz 2010: 73 ff.). In terms of models and points of departure, *Optimistische Komposition* is probably best observed as a type of "free fantasia" (*phantasieren*) described in the early 20th-century editions of Hugo Riemann's *Musik Lexikon* as a mode of extempore playing that gives "free rein to the fancy."[15] According to the *Musik Lexikon* this form of extemporization "yields moods of various colors, producing a kaleidoscopic effect" (Riemann 1908: 368 f.). However, rather than "a fantasia on a melody" (i.e., one of the modes of *phantasieren* mentioned in the *Musik Lexikon*), it can be analyzed as a fantasia on two themes divided into three sections or episodes (A-B-A') (Figure 25.5), the last section (section A', ms. 59 ff.) being an inverted reprise of measures 1–16 (to which a coda of two measures is attached). The improvised form appears to have been engendered by variations, transpositions, inversions, and contrapuntal combinations of the two themes' motifs and gestures.

Theme one can be defined as a four-measure sequence (a) that is played twice (i.e. a + a'), generating a formal structure of eight measures. The sequence itself includes the initial motif (m. 1) which is first restated (m. 2) and then varied (ms. 3–4) (Figure 25.6). Theme two is constituted of two phrases of four measures (Figure 25.7). The harmonic and melodic material in theme one is mostly derived from a B Dorian scale. The second theme draws on two different modes – D Dorian for the antecedent phrase, and F Mixolydian for the consequent – while simultaneously remaining on a C sharp pedal throughout the eight measures.[17]

An example of variation can be observed in ms. 17–20 where the musical gesture initially played in the bass in ms. 1–4 is transposed three octaves up and played above the motif in the treble, while the C# pedal in the bass continues to be held (Figure 25.8).

Section A Ms. 1–16	**Theme 1** Sequence of four measures played twice Ms. 1–8	**Theme 2** Period (4+4) Ms. 9–16	
Transition 1			Transition to section B Ms. 17–30
Section B Ms. 31–58			
	"build up in complexity" Ms. 31–43		
		"climax" Ms. 43–50	
Transition 2			"decrease in complexity" Ms. 51–8
Section A' Ms. 59–74	**Theme 2** Ms. 59–66	**Theme 1** Ms. 67–74	
Coda Ms. 75–6			

Figure 25.5 Erwin Schulhoff, *Optimistische Komposition*, 1936. Overall structure.

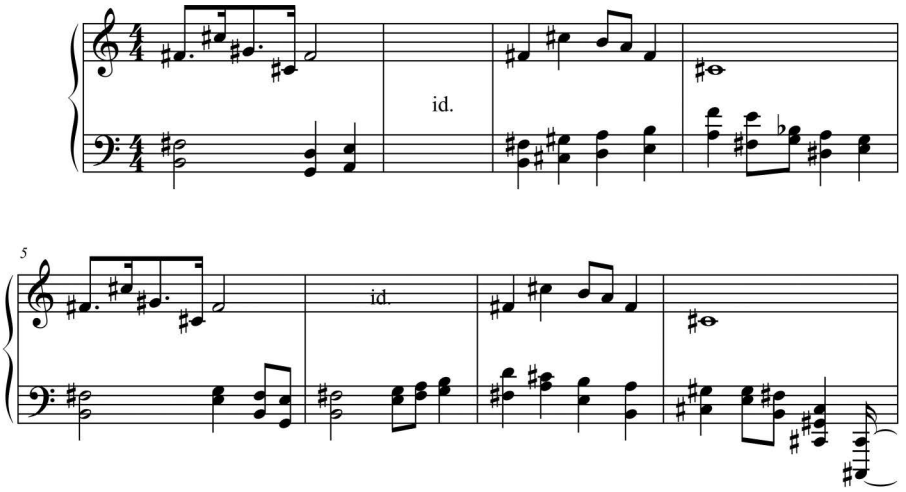



Figure 25.6 Erwin Schulhoff, *Optimistische Komposition*, Theme 1, Measures 1–8 (transcr. Wilson).[16]

The B section (ms. 31–58), which can be understood as a type of development, follows a transition initiated in measure 23. In measures 23–5, the same motif as in measure 3 is sequentially altered and transposed (first a major third down from $F\#_4$ to D_4 in m. 24 and then a further fifth down in m. 25). In measure 26, the piece's initial motif in the treble (m. 1) is doubly reiterated in its original rhythmic configuration (i.e., dotted eighth note/sixteenth note/dotted eighth note/sixteenth note), first starting on $F\#_3$ then on C_3. In the middle section, Schulhoff also contrapuntally merges elements from both themes, progressing to a climactic dense polymodal texture

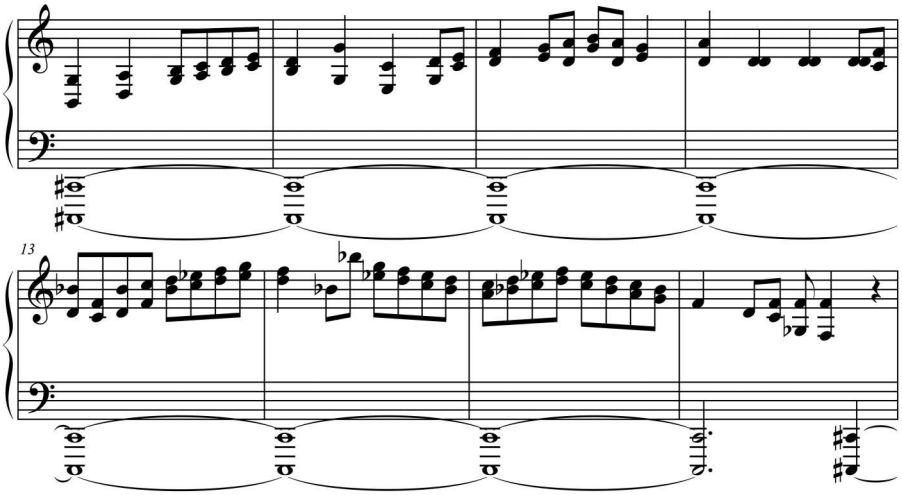


Figure 25.7 Erwin Schulhoff, *Optimistische Komposition*, Theme 2, Measures 9–16.

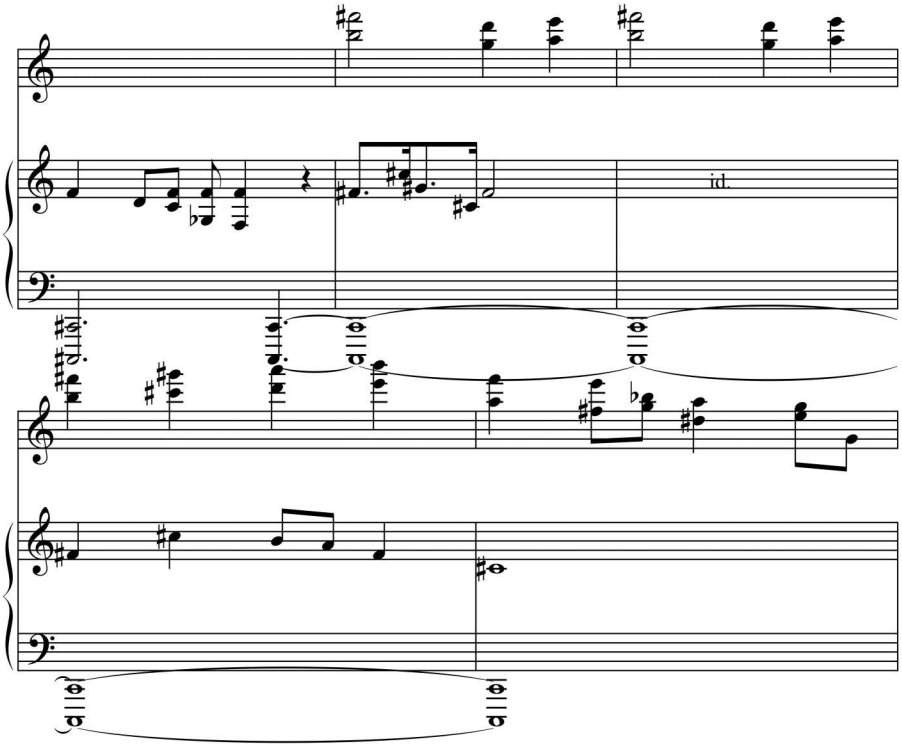



Figure 25.8 Erwin Schulhoff, *Optimistische Komposition*, Measures 17–20 (starting on m. 16).[18]

(Figure 25.9), which is reached in measures 43–50 (not shown), before returning, in measure 51, to a variant of the middle section's initial eight measures (ms. 31–8). This passage rapidly loosens the relatively opaque polyphony of the previous measures and serves as a transition to the reprise, starting at measure 59 (A').

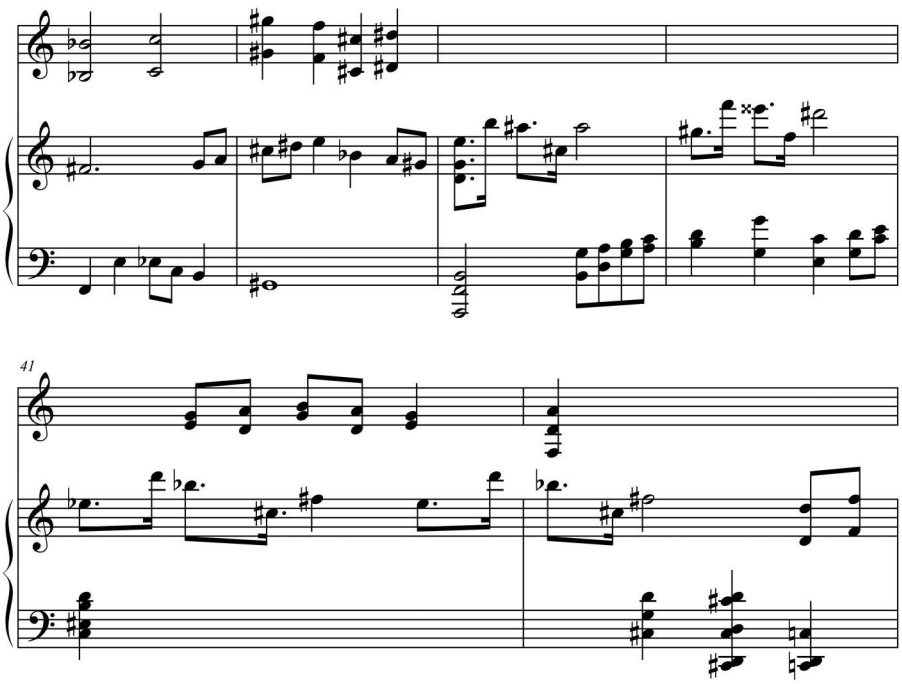



Figure 25.9 Erwin Schulhoff, *Optimistische Komposition*, moving towards the climax, Measures 37–42.

5 Analysis of *Part IX* of Luening's *Trio for Flute, Violin, and Soprano* (1923–24)

Examples of early 20th-century art music that rely on chance and/or improvisation for their musical form – as found in the last part of Otto Luening's 1924 *Trio for Flute, Violin, and Soprano* – invariably conflict with our current historization of art music. When observed, they are generally perceived as historical curiosities with little or no impact on the evolution of music. Nevertheless, *Part IX* of Luening's *Trio* is yet another example of a realization irritating the commonly held discourse (in historical musicology) that improvisation in Western art music contexts had ceased to exist by the second half of the 19th century. It also destabilizes two other conventionally accepted ideas. First, it weakens the claim that the concepts of aleatory music or open form first emerged in art music around 1950. Secondly, it undermines the commonplace view as expressed by Griffiths (2017) that such forms were neither influenced by improvised musics, such as jazz and folk traditions, nor by earlier musical dice games and musical riddles.

In terms of density, works composed between 1900 and 1950 that rely on chance or open form might not be comparable to the myriad of examples realized after 1950 by such composers as John Cage, Pierre Boulez, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Morton Feldman, or Earle Brown.[19] Nevertheless, they should not be limited to the often mentioned works by Charles Ives, Percy Grainger, and Henry Cowell. Next to Ives' *Central Park in the Dark* (1906) or *The Unanswered Question* (1908), Percy Grainger's *Random Round* (1912–14), or Cowell's *Mosaic Quartet* of 1935, other examples include (together with Luening's *Part IX*) Darius Milhaud's *Cocktail aux Clarinettes* (1920) and Carl Nielsen's *Symphony No. 5* (composed between 1920 and 1922). Moreover, and although generated in a radically different artistic context, further cases can be found in the work of members of the (so-called) historical avant-garde (Bürger 1984) such as Marcel Duchamp's *Erratum Musical* of 1913 or Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes' *Le Pas de la chicorée frisée* (1920) (Wilson, forthcoming).

While Luening's *Trio for Flute, Violin, and Soprano* was first published by Highgate Press in 1960, the different parts were composed in 1923 and 1924. Evidence suggests that *Part IX* was first conceived as the last movement of a work initially entitled "Essay in Sound" and finished on October 24, 1923. The work was composed while Luening was living in Chicago where he had moved in 1920 after eight years in Europe (Hartsock 1991: 4). At the compositional level, *Part IX*, appears to be strongly influenced by the theories of Bernhard Ziehn, a music theorist of German origin and whose student, the reputed organist Wilhelm Middelschulte (1863–1943), was Luening's teacher in Chicago (Wilson, forthcoming).

Contrary to the other movements of the *Trio*, which are fully written out, the notated form of *Part IX* consists solely of half notes, sixteen for each voice (i.e., flute, violin, and soprano/voice), with no bar lines, rests, rhythmic variations, or expression markings (Figure 25.10). While the three sequences of sixteen notes all have a different melodic contour, the partition also includes seven instructions for performance (Figure 25.11). Performers are free to start when they want and can repeat their line as many times as desired. They should make their own rhythmical divisions and are free to add accidentals to the notes of their respective sequence. In terms of overall balance, Luening suggests that one voice should dominate while the other two furnish the background. Nevertheless, as a means of contrast, it is also permitted for all the voices to be of equal strength for a short time. To conclude, Luening summarizes his perception of the work as follows: "The essay (a possible reference to the composition's initial title) signifies constant change, this change to be produced through the animation of the composer's notes by the imagination of the performers" (Luening 1960: 2).

In its written form, *Part IX* can be observed as an example of a composition that explicitly frames and projects itself as a means of generating in performance ever-changing forms (i.e., variant III). While the score's particularities (i.e., no bar lines, rests, rhythmic variations, or expression markings) and the composer's instructions might first be aimed at the performers, they can also be

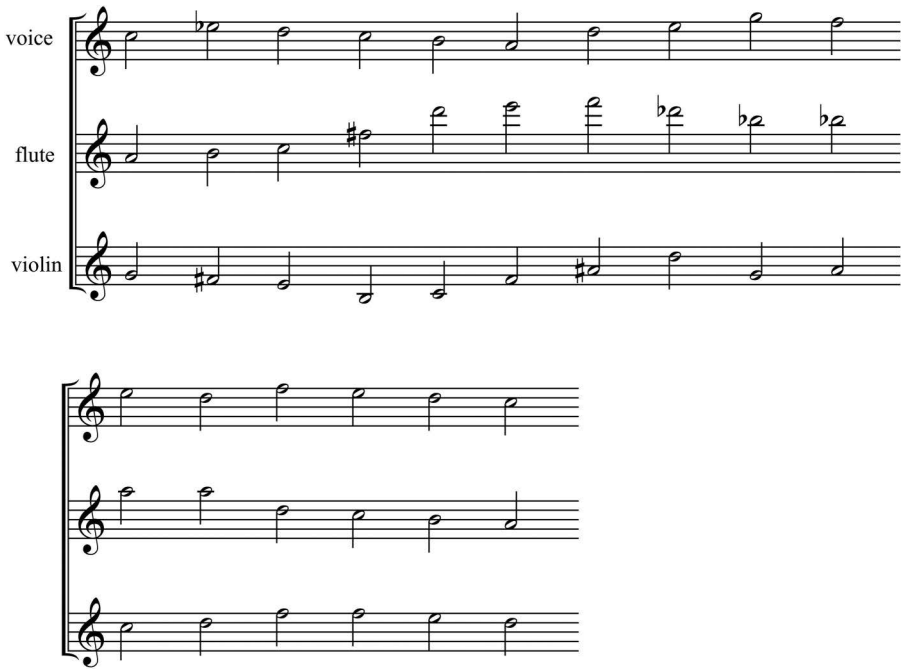
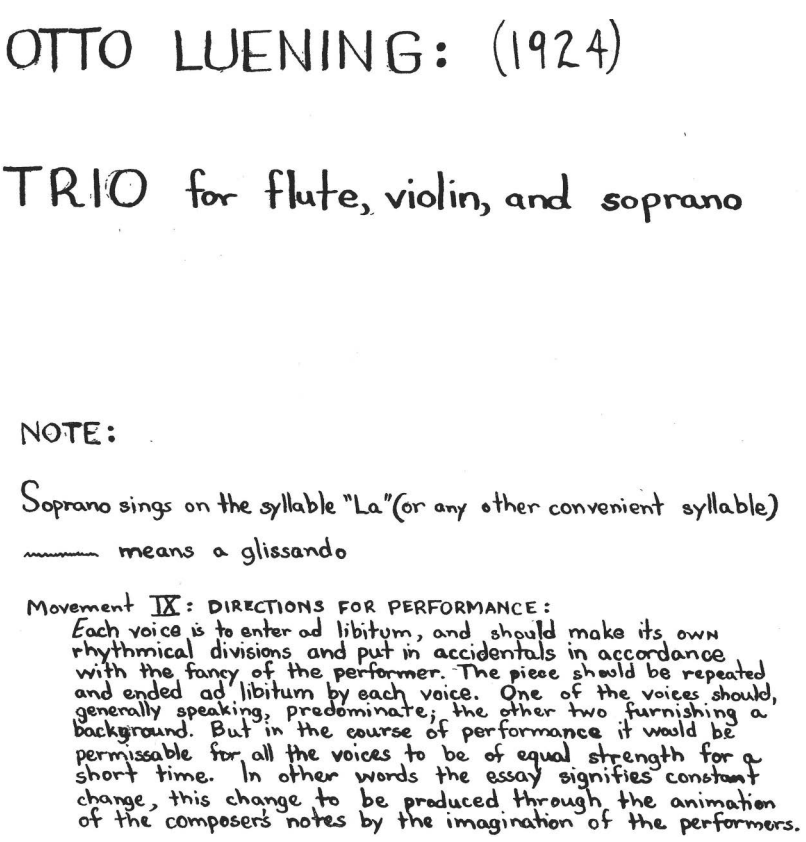



Figure 25.10 Otto Luening, *Trio for Flute, Violin, and Soprano* (1923–24), Part IX, transcr. Wilson.[20]


OTTO LUENING: (1924)

TRIO for flute, violin, and soprano

NOTE:

Soprano sings on the syllable "La" (or any other convenient syllable)

~~~~ means a glissando

Movement IX: DIRECTIONS FOR PERFORMANCE:

Each voice is to enter ad libitum, and should make its own rhythmical divisions and put in accidentals in accordance with the fancy of the performer. The piece should be repeated and ended ad libitum by each voice. One of the voices should, generally speaking, predominate; the other two furnishing a background. But in the course of performance it would be permissable for all the voices to be of equal strength for a short time. In other words the essay signifies constant change, this change to be produced through the animation of the composer's notes by the imagination of the performers.

Figure 25.11 Otto Luening, *Trio for Flute, Violin, and Soprano* (1923–24), Highgate Press, n.d., 1960, p. 2.

interpreted as the means by which Luening communicates to the audience *Part IX*'s distinctiveness as a work whose realizations are never identical. Theoretically, and when perceived as some kind of algorithm, *Part IX* is capable of generating an infinite (or quasi-infinite) number of forms. In practice, however, the number of variants is strongly constrained by the performers' improvisatory skills and imagination. From this perspective, such realizations could be observed as examples of improvisation as a means of live performance (i.e., variant I). Yet the entire process might even just be an illusion, the musicians invariably realizing the same form at each performance thereby turning *Part IX* into an example of variant IV.

Luening was not only a composer but also a flutist and a keen improviser, who claims to have improvised in some kind of jazz-influenced idiom in the early 1920s.[21] He was also attracted to ludic or game-like compositions, which, for instance, explore canon structures – a fascination he possibly inherited from Bernhard Ziehn. Ziehn had possibly himself been influenced by Karl(Carl) F. Weitzmann, a German musician and music theorist who wrote canon puzzles/riddles such as his *Musikalische Rätsel* (Weitzmann ca. 1860). These *Musikalische Rätsel* include specific instructions for performance, a technique Ziehn is said to have used when teaching and which in Luening's case is not only found in *Part IX* but also in other works (e.g., *Sonority Canon for 3 up to 37 Flutes* of 1958). Whereas the extensive freedom of choice left to the performers in *Part IX* remains a rather unique case in Luening's oeuvre, he appears to have sometimes relied on improvisation as a means of composition as in the organ parts of the music for a (self-proclaimed) *experimental* theatrical production of Maurice Maeterlink's play *Sister Beatrice,* performed at the beginning of 1926 (Wilson, forthcoming).
~~~~

6 Conclusion

Be it in the early 20th or the 21st century, the defining boundaries of the notion of improvisation seem to be just as open to negotiation, (re-)interpretation, or expansion as those delineating the concept of authenticity.[22] One aspect of a musical work's authenticity as defined by Adorno, Max Paddison writes, "concerns the way a work appears to be what it is because it can be no other way […]." As Paddison points out, this idea is bound to the concepts of self-contained structural consistency and of totality (Paddison 2008: 199). On the other hand, and from a first-order perspective, an artistic and creative process *in statu nascendi* might best describe an authentic improvisation. Ferand, for his part, related perfection of form, consistency, and fully planned structure to the works of J. S. Bach, Mozart, or Beethoven. Yet, he argued, the basic aesthetic secret of the works of these great masters lay in the fact that they gave an (authentic) impression of an improvisation, or in Ferand's words – "the impression of the immediate, unwanted, non-reflective, organically grown, i.e. – improvisational" (Ferand 1938: 12).

First-order observation is an indication of something in opposition to everything that is not indicated. In this case, Luhmann suggests, "the distinction between distinction and indication is not thematized." The focus is on the object being observed. It is indifferent to the *how* and *why* of an observation and only concerned by the *what*. The observer – understood here as an entity located within the phenomenon being observed – and his observing activity remain unobserved (Luhmann 2000: 61). Second-order observation provides a window onto the observational mode and motivation of other scientists or scholars. Although it is simultaneously first-order observation, "[it] indicates that the observation occurs as observation, that it must use a distinction, and even what kind of distinction it must use" (Luhmann 2000: 63). It observes how and why a phenomenon has been distinguished and indicated. The observations made in this chapter – such as the four forms of improvisation mentioned above, the case studies, or the conceptual-methodological framework of my construct – can be interpreted as an exercise in second-order observation. This construct does not seek to define the concept of improvisation and its practices in ontological terms. Nor does it focus on improvisation's degrees of authenticity or inauthenticity. While imperfect, it allows us to distinguish four variants of improvisation that differentiate themselves from the work concept as realized in the science of art music after 1950. More importantly, it is a conceptual framework capable of dealing with two seemingly incompatible discourses, respectively, the presence versus the absence of improvisation in art music contexts of the first half of the 20th century (Wilson, forthcoming).

Schulhoff and Luening are convincing examples of the type of performing composer, capable of improvising, who continued to thrive after 1900. *Sami Dva*, *Optimistische Komposition,* and *Part IX* are but some of the forms of improvisation that can be observed not only in the oeuvres of Schulhoff and Luening but also in those of other classically trained musicians of the period. Somewhat paradoxically in regards to the observations made in this chapter, the current historiography of improvisation not only claims that improvisation had become irrelevant by the mid-19th century in Western art music contexts but also perceives the forms that emerged in the so-called *neue Musik* of the 1950s and thereafter as unrelated to the medium's earlier realizations. From a constructivist perspective, however, this seeming paradox does not imply that studies that do not comply with the line of thought favored in this chapter are wrong *per se*. As Glasersfeld writes, "constructivism is a theory of knowing, not of being." It does not deny reality but only denies that we (scholars and scientists) can rationally know a reality beyond our experience (Glasersfeld 2001). Therefore, the above-mentioned *paradox* tends to confirm that all academic observations generate blind spots that are the result of the distinctions made by the observer. These blind spots can only be cognized by further observations that might highlight what had initially remained hidden, contributing thereby to the

constant re-actualization of past observations as well as to the emergence of previously unobserved yet meaningful insights. From a non-constructivist perspective, one could paraphrase Margaret Bent's views on the notion of *revision* in scholarship, which for the most part does not imply the reversal of an accepted view but the recognition of the subtler dimensions of the problem (Bent 2002: 315).

Notes

1 Authentic American jazz, as defined by Robinson (1994a and 1994b), and the French organ school – represented by Olivier Messiaen and his teacher Marcel Dupré, whose *Traité d'Improvisation à l'Orgue* (Dupré 1925) was published in 1925 – are invariably perceived as the exception that confirms the rule that improvisation was no longer a relevant medium in art music after 1900 (Wilson, forthcoming).
2 For a detailed analysis of improvisation as both a concept and a practice in post-1950 art music, and concerning the legitimacy of defining indeterminacy, chance operations, experimental music, aleatory techniques, open form, and intuitive music as concepts related to the idea of improvisation, see Feisst 1997; 2016.
3 Concerning the use of the term *knowledge* as understood in this chapter, see Glasersfeld 2002.
4 About the idea of aesthetic autonomy as a Classical-Romantic category, see Dahlhaus 1987: 237.
5 E.g., C. Weichert: *Schulhoff: Piano Works Vol. 2* (Grand Piano: GP631), 2013.
6 Unless otherwise mentioned, all translations are my own.
7 Schulhoff and Letfus performed *Sami Dva* at least twice in 1936 (Wilson 2019).
8 See Wilson 2019 for an example of a *Schlager* written by Schulhoff (under the pseudonym Hanus Petr) that also served as platforms for their improvised performances.
9 A variant of *Sami Dva*'s overall structure, which is not mapped on Baresel's taxonomy, is outlined in Wilson 2019.
10 In *Sami Dva* the A part in E flat major, the B part in B flat major.
11 The only difference between Baresel's description of a vamp and its actualization in *Sami Dva* is the change in key, the vamp being in E flat minor and part A in E flat major.
12 The transcription of *Sami Dva* was made possible thanks to the invaluable help of Elia Marcionetti and Carlos Gil Gonzalo.
13 Baresel also mentions in his book improvised countermelodies or counter-voice (*die improvisierte Gegenstimme*) (Baresel 1929: 92).
14 In the recording, measure 89 starts around 01:43. For more information concerning the recording, see Wilson 2019.
15 The expression "free fantasia" is taken from J.S. Shedlock's 1908, translation of Riemann's *Musik Lexikon*.
16 The transcriptions of *Optimistische Komposition* are all based on Schulhoff's draft copy of the piece housed at the National Museum of Prague - Czech Museum of Music (Cz-Pnm, manuscripts S 173-334-1 to S 173-334-4).
17 The B Dorian scale consists of the notes B, C#, D, E, F# G#, A, B. The D Dorian scale is made up of D, E, F, G, A, B, C, D and F Mixolydian of F, G, A, Bb, C, D, Eb, F.
18 To facilitate analysis, the music has been transcribed on three staves (two treble clefs and the F-clef).
19 For a discussion on the possible distinction between indeterminate processes, aleatory techniques, and open form, see Feisst 1997.
20 This transcription is based on the manuscript version of *Part IX* housed at the NYPL. Concerning the manuscript, see Wilson, forthcoming.
21 In his autobiography, Luening mentions his "jazz improvisation" while in Chicago in the 1920s (see Luening 1980: 232). Improvisation is also mentioned in his collaborations with Vladimir Ussachevsky, e.g., Luening describes the creation process of *Low Speed* as based on "simple sketches on which I based my flute improvisations." (Luening 1980: 515)
22 Concerning the link between authenticity and improvisation, see for instance Bertinetto 2019.

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26

IMPROVISATION AND COMPOSITION

A Schoenbergian View

Sabine Feisst

At first glance, an examination of concepts of improvisation in the works of Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), the famous modernist composer and pioneer of the twelve-tone technique, may seem like an unpromising topic that suggests little more than speculative outcomes. During his rich musical career, Schoenberg did not distinguish himself as an improvising instrumentalist, and, unlike some of his contemporaries, he never composed scores that allowed performers much interpretative freedom. But as an astute observer of his diverse cultural environments in Europe and the United States, a self-conscious artist, an articulate commentator on the arts, and a friend and teacher of such noted improvisers as George Gershwin, Oscar Levant, and George Tremblay, he had important things to say about improvisation, inspiration, and spontaneity. In this chapter I trace how Schoenberg came to terms with improvisation in Europe and America; elaborate on his notions of improvisation, inspiration, and spontaneity in creative processes; and show how improvisation found its way into his works at different stages in his career.

1 Schoenberg's Reservations about Improvisation

Schoenberg developed his views on improvisation in the social and cultural milieu of Europe in which he matured as an artist, and in America.[1] On both continents, he encountered a variety of improvisatory practices that shaped his ideas of improvisation. Crucially, however, his views of improvisation were intricately linked with his compositional aesthetics and his self-concept as a composer of artistically sophisticated "highbrow" music that is organically and logically constructed, highly controlled through detailed notation, and packaged as series of opera (Schoenberg retained the habit of assigning opus numbers to his compositions) reflecting historicity (Feisst 1995: 40–9). In this regard, Schoenberg's compositions seem incompatible with traditional notions of improvisation.

Equipped with little formal musical training from his modest family background, Schoenberg experienced manifold types of music when growing up in Leopoldstadt, the predominantly Jewish Second District of Vienna, including music improvised by cantors, church and street musicians, klezmer bands, cabaret, and theater artists. From orchestrating light and popular operettas and creating cabaret songs, he gradually worked his way into Vienna's elite musical hierarchies, composing structurally dense, timbrally rich, and technically demanding works that were printed and distributed by notable publishers, performed by highly acclaimed musicians, reviewed by newspaper critics, and theorized in music journals and magazines.[2] By

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the middle of 1907, he was widely regarded as a representative of "high art" and maintained this reputation until he died in 1951.

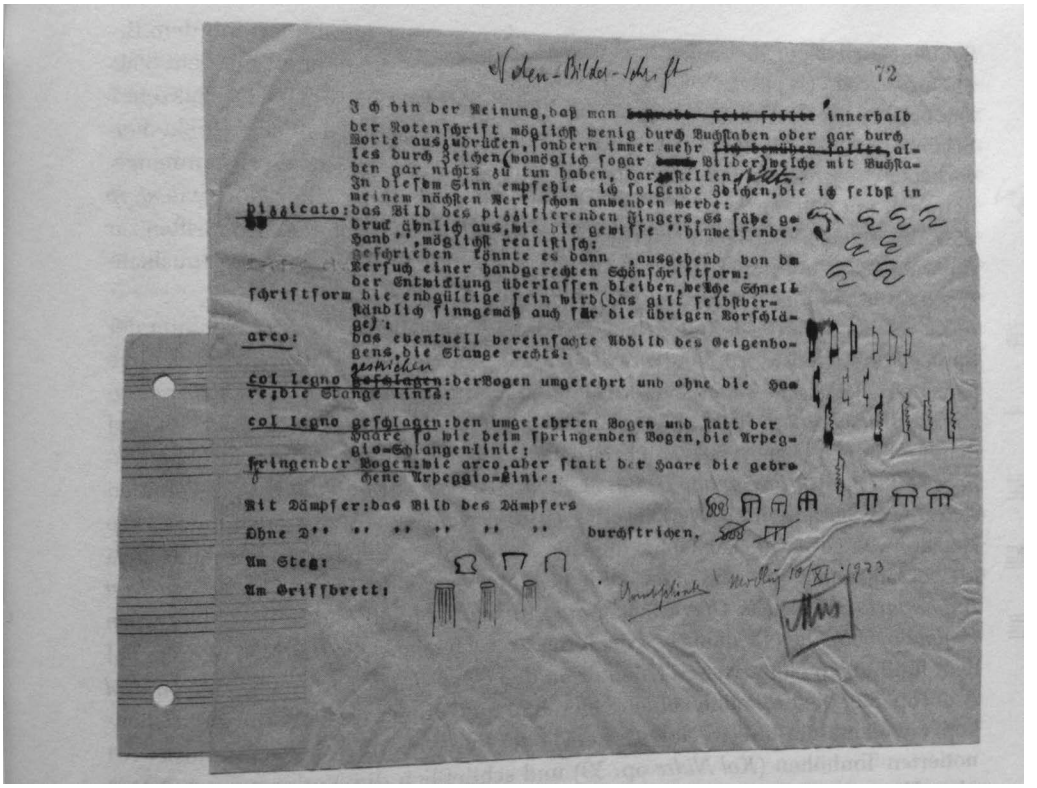
During Schoenberg's career, improvisation played a lesser role in Western art or "highbrow" music due to a stronger focus on class belonging, historical awareness, literacy, and notation, as well as changing aesthetic values. Improvisation became much more strongly associated with musical practices classified as "low art" such as *Gebrauchsmusik*, folk, popular, and commercial music often presented in informal settings such as the music halls, cafés, and amusement parks frequented by the lower classes (Moore 1992: 69–71; also see Landgraf 2011: 7). Thus, while ascending in the existing social and musical hierarchies in Austria and Germany, Schoenberg distanced himself from the ethnic and popular music-making in his environment and paid less attention to improvisation (Moore 1992: 74–8). Artistically ambitious and historically conscious, he was interested in producing timeless monuments, innovative creations the details of which are as meticulously fixed as possible through notation. Through such works, he hoped to join the ranks of the esteemed composers of the past he greatly admired and earn both the attention and respect of his contemporaries from the social, intellectual, academic, and artistic elite as well as receive posthumous recognition. Generally speaking, improvisation, if not transcribed or captured on audio records and film, in descriptive reports or remembered, seems fleeting and transitory and unavailable for posterity – clearly undesirable qualities in Schoenberg's view.

At different stages in his career, before 1905, in the early 1910s, 1920s, and 1930s, Schoenberg grappled with oral performance practices and indeterminate notation types in 18th-century music when he realized figured bass parts of works or arranged works by such composers as Johann Sebastian Bach, George F. Handel, Matthias Georg Monn, Johann Christoph Mann, and Franz Seraf Ignaz Anton Tuma and these experiences undoubtedly shaped the ways he notated his own music. In arranging these works of the past, he added many timbral, melodic, harmonic, dynamic, rhythmic, and tempo details not specified in the existing scores, which he deemed incomplete and in need of reconfiguration and enlivening.[3]

Schoenberg's concern with fixity and control of musical outcomes is reflected in both his notation styles and performance aesthetics since the early 1900s and built on trends that evolved in the early 19th century, hierarchically ranking the composer above the performer. As is well known, he filled his music scores with numerous details that specify dynamics, timbre, tempo, and expressive nuances in great detail. In 1923, he suggested a *Noten-Bilderschrift* (image-based notation), introducing timbre symbols to replace lengthy verbal indications, although throughout his career, he depended on verbal instructions to complement the inherited conventions of notation (see Figure 26.1).

Though not unusual among his peers at this time, Schoenberg prescribed the execution of trills and appoggiaturas. Unsurprisingly, his four solo concertos, one each for cello, string quartet, violin, and piano, composed between 1932 and 1942, lack improvised cadenzas. Schoenberg often reflected on the inadequacy of music notation in general. From the performers of his music, he expected fidelity to the score. Their interpretative flexibility or improvisatory freedom, which Schoenberg's brother in law, violinist Rudolf Kolisch, called "Viennese Espressivo," is limited to very small amounts of alterability in his detailed scores.[4]

There is no evidence that Schoenberg heard Max Reger (1873–1916), whom he admired, and other accomplished composers improvise on the organ or that he witnessed such renowned keyboardists as Eugène d'Albert (1864–1932), Josef Hofmann (1876–1957), and Wilhelm Kempff (1895–1991), who are known to have kept alive the tradition of preluding – improvising introductions to composed works – in their piano recitals in the early 20th century.[5] Schoenberg would presumably not have tolerated preluding or ornamentation in performances of his works as he strove for unadorned "truth" and "essence" in his music.


Noten-Bilder-Schrift 72

Ich bin der Meinung, daß man ~~bisweilen sein sollte~~ innerhalb der Notenschrift möglichst wenig durch Buchstaben oder gar durch Worte ausdrücken, sondern immer mehr ~~sie bemühen sollte~~, alles durch Zeichen (womöglich sogar ~~Noten~~ Bilder) welche mit Buchstaben gar nichts zu tun haben, darstellen.
In diesem Sinn empfehle ich folgende Zeichen, die ich selbst in meinem nächsten Werk schon anwenden werde:

pizzicato: das Bild des pizzikierenden Fingers, es sähe gedruckt ähnlich aus, wie die gewisse "hinweisende" Hand", möglichst realistisch:

schriftform: geschrieben könnte es dann, ausgehend von dem Versuch einer handgerechten Schönschriftform: der Entwicklung überlassen bleiben, welche schnell die endgültige sein wird (das gilt selbstverständlich sinngemäß auch für die übrigen Vorschläge):

arco: das eventuell vereinfachte Abbild des Geigenbogens, die Stange rechts:

col legno ~~gefolgert~~: der Bogen umgekehrt und ohne die Haare, die Stange links:

col legno geschlagen: den umgekehrten Bogen und statt der Haare so wie beim springenden Bogen, die Arpeggio-Schlangenlinie:

springender Bogen: wie arco, aber statt der Haare die gebrochene Arpeggio-Linie:

Mit Dämpfer: das Bild des Dämpfers

Ohne D" " " " " " durchstrichen,

Am Steg:

Am Griffbrett:

Berlin 10/XI 1923

Figure 26.1 Arnold Schoenberg's *Noten-Bilderschrift* (image-based notation). Courtesy Belmont Music Publishers.

In general, he believed that improvised performances of classical music were mostly inferior to composition, including improvisations by Bach. He claimed: "When Bach wrote his *Musical Offering* he made clear the difference between an improvisation and an elaborated composition. Though he was a great improviser, he could not do justice to a theme given by Frederick the Great."[6] Schoenberg's skeptical view of improvisation was rooted in his understanding of the development of classical music. He wrote: "Before musical notation existed a musician was primarily an improviser, even if he improvised the same thing several times" (Schoenberg 1947).[7] Seeing classical music as an outgrowth of folk music, he said that "folk music is always perfect, because it stems from improvisation – that is, from a lightning flash of inspiration." In his view, "[r]eal folk music could not exist, or survive, were it not produced similarly: spontaneously, as an inspired improvisation spontaneously […]. Folk tunes have been improvised singing or playing by bards, troubadours and other gifted persons" (Schoenberg 1950b: 202).

Strongly identified with improvisation, jazz moved to the forefront of popular music culture in Europe in the 1920s, capturing the imagination of many artists in both the popular and classical arenas. Although it is often stereotyped as improvised popular music, it would be wrong to classify all of the expressions of jazz as popular music, to assume that jazz equals improvisation, lacking notation and escaping fixity, and to perceive its manifold idioms as static. But in Europe and elsewhere the differentiation between improvised and composed jazz as well as low-brow and high-brow jazz was uncommon between the two world wars.

Schoenberg first experienced music marketed as "jazz" or "American" after World War I when he frequented bars and cafés in Vienna and Berlin. According to the American foreign

correspondent César Saerchinger, in 1924 Schoenberg was seen listening "with rapture to a set of American jazz records" and allegedly said, "Jazz is amusing. I like it in some moods, and I think it has its place" (Saerchinger 1924; 1931) In the 1920s, however, Schoenberg made mostly critical statements about jazz. It is, however, unclear what he was criticizing because it is unclear what he meant by "jazz" (notwithstanding the fact that what falls into the rubric of jazz is debated to this day). Records circulating in Europe at this time included syncopated song and dance music and ragtime that was influenced by African-American music, but mostly created by white musicians such as Irving Berlin. J. Bradford Robinson rightly pointed out that much of what was labeled "jazz" or "American" in Weimar Germany was overwhelmingly German commercial music with little relationship to African-American creativity. In his words, "The German jazz craze thrived on a musical surrogate developed by German musicians from their own commercial traditions, upon which they imposed vague notions as to the actual sound and nature of the fabled music from America" (Robinson 1994: 4). Military bands, salon orchestras, and so-called *Radaukapellen* (racket bands) drew on ragtime syncopations and a flamboyant performance style and marketed this novel brand as "jazz" (see, for instance, filmed performances of the Weintraub Syncopators on YouTube or other internet platforms).

Such music may have included some improvisation, which, in the case of café orchestras, was often delivered by a *Stehgeiger* (standing violinist-leader) of East European origin. It would have also exhibited much repetition of musical material and mechanical rhythms. Always avoiding literal repetition and mechanical expression in his compositions, Schoenberg detested "primitive dance music" played in a "frigid" and "stiff" fashion for "dancers inspired by their bodies and narcotized by their dancing partners."[8] Consequently he did not favor the overt mixing of jazz and "serious" music and felt that jazz had not influenced his own work, "except perhaps in a very minor degree" (Schoenberg 1928: 242). He warned that through the use of jazz, a "mechanical cliché is imposed upon art" blurring the lines between "music of value and inferior kitsch" (Schoenberg 1999a). This position clearly allowed him to distance himself from such jazz-inspired composers as Paul Hindemith, Darius Milhaud, Erwin Schulhoff, Igor Stravinsky, and Kurt Weill some of whom explored various forms of improvisation in their creative practice.[9]

To Schoenberg, a generous inclusion of elements from jazz and American dance music seemed irreconcilable with his then purist idea of "German music":

> As long as there is German music and one rightly understands what that has meant up to now, jazz will never have a greater influence on it than did Gypsy music in its time. The occasional use of several themes and the addition of foreign color to several phrases have never changed the essential: the body of ideas and the technique of its presentation. Such impulses can be compared to a disguise. Whoever dresses up as an Arab or a Tyrolean intends to appear this way only externally and temporarily, and as soon as the fun of the masquerade is over, he wants once again to be the person he was before.
>
> *(Schoenberg 1999b: 290 ff.)*

Interestingly, Schulhoff challenged Schoenberg's nationalist attitude in several letters:

> Mr. Schönberg, I could not care less if the truth in art is German, English, French or Hottentot, I don't approve of national art. Mr. Schönberg, I am amazed that you speak of a "national art" […]. You say "When I contemplate music, I can only think of German music!" I openly and honestly admit, that I would have never thought in such a way. "When I contemplate art, I always think of human experience!"
>
> *(Schulhoff 1919)*

1.1 Some of Schoenberg's Improvising Students and Friends

While Schoenberg was not close to Schulhoff, who was twenty years younger and could have been his student, he had several disciples who did explore improvisation, and who dabbled in jazz-inspired composition and composed music for popular genres (theater and cabaret music, songs, film scores), among them the German-born American artist Rudolph Goehr (1906–81) and Polish-born British Józef Żmigrod (1902–73).[10] Both attended Schoenberg's masterclass at the Academy of Arts in Berlin, but unfortunately little is known about their specific approaches to improvisation and how Schoenberg assessed this activity as their careers suffered major setbacks from the political upheavals in Nazi-controlled Europe in the 1930s and 40s.[11]

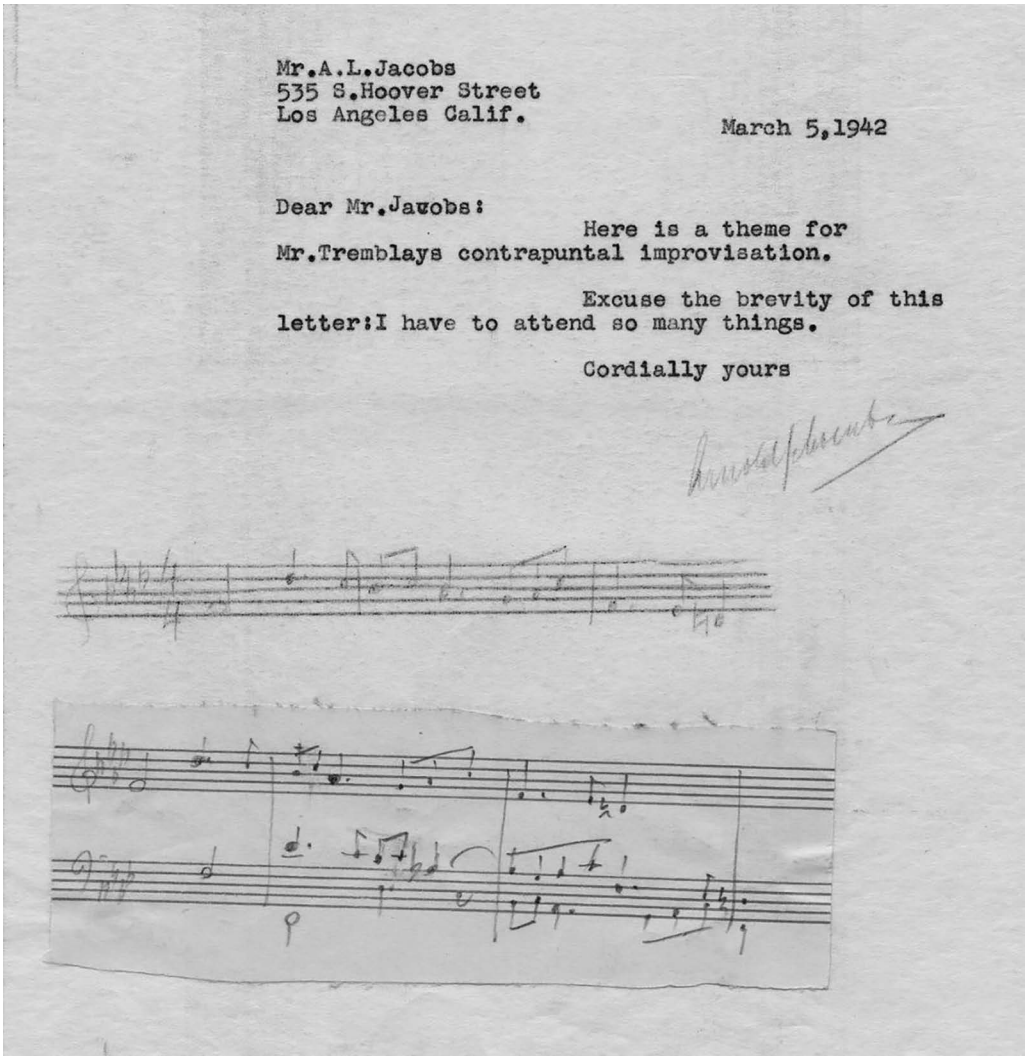
As mentioned above, Schoenberg himself had to flee the Nazis in 1933 and thereafter settled in the United States, where he lived until his death in 1951. There, he had many opportunities to hear live jazz and experience some of the most talented improvisers of his time first hand. He knew and befriended such skilled improvisers as Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Thomas Griselle, Oscar Levant, David Raksin, Artie Shaw, Nathaniel Shilkret, and George Tremblay, to name a few.[12] I argue that they made him rethink his ideas about jazz and improvisation in his later years.

Griselle and Shilkret, whom Schoenberg taught in New York City in the 1930s, were both composers, instrumentalists, and conductors indebted to symphonic jazz and led their own orchestras. As head of the Victor Talking Machine Company's light music department, Shilkret initiated and conducted a highly successful series of symphonic jazz recordings that included improvised passages.[13] Albert Sendrey, another composer of symphonic jazz, and Gershwin were both acquaintances from Schoenberg's Los Angeles years. In 1937, Schoenberg heard Gershwin perform his own works at a concert featuring *Rhapsody in Blue*, the Concerto in F, *An American in Paris*, and excerpts from *Porgy and Bess*. On several occasions, Schoenberg discussed Gershwin's compositional style and remarked on its organic character, though he, like many others, classified Gershwin's music sometimes as classical, sometimes as popular. In 1938 Schoenberg speculated on the role of improvisation in Gershwin's compositional process:

> [His] melodies are not products of a combination, nor of a mechanical union, but they are units and could therefore not be taken to pieces. Melody, harmony and rhythm are not welded together, but cast. I do not know it, but I imagine he improvised them on the piano. Perhaps he gave them later the finishing touch; perhaps he spent much time to go over them again and again – I do not know. But the impression is that of an improvisation with all the merits and shortcomings appertaining to this kind of production. Their effect […] might be compared to that of an oration which might disappoint you when you read and examine it as with a magnifying glass – you miss what touched you so much, when you were overwhelmed by the charm of the orator's personality. One has probably to add something of one's own to reestablish the first effect. But it is always that way with art – you get from a work about as much as you are able to give to it yourself.
>
> *(Schoenberg 1984a: 476 f.)*

Now best known as a performer of Gershwin's music and quick-witted comedian, Oscar Levant composed, under Schoenberg's tutelage, a Piano Concerto (1936), blending atonality, blues-inspired harmonies, Gershwin-esque driving rhythms, and jazzy orchestration. Levant was a very talented improviser, expanding and compressing Gershwin's music on the spur of the moment in his public performances.[14] He delighted Schoenberg, along with large American audiences, when ad-libbing in music, conversations, and comedy sketches in radio and film.[15] Schoenberg may have listened to Levant's appearance in *The Fred Allen Show*, a popular radio show, on 31 January 1943 when he participated in a comic skit referencing music by Chopin, Grieg, and modernist composers in a "symphonic jingle" for comic effect.[16]

As a last example, Canadian-born American composer George Tremblay (1911–82), one of Schoenberg's first private pupils in Los Angeles in the mid-1930s, was equally talented as an improviser. A noted organist, Tremblay publicly improvised on the organ since childhood, gained visibility as an improviser in the Los Angeles jazz and contemporary music scenes. He typically prefaced his own "ultramodern" compositions and works by others with improvisations in the manner of preluding and often invited composers to submit themes on which he improvised as part of a concert's program. In May 1942, the *Los Angeles Times* announced that, as part of the Modern Music Festival, Tremblay would "extemporize on themes submitted by Joseph Achron, Arnold Schoenberg, Ernst Toch, and Adolph Weiss" ("Timely Music to Be Played at Festival," Los Angeles Times, 17 May 1942). Schoenberg followed festival organizer Arthur Jacobs's request of thematic material for Tremblay, providing a three-measure theme for a contrapuntal improvisation (Figure 26.2).[17]


Mr.A.L.Jacobs
535 S.Hoover Street
Los Angeles Calif.

March 5,1942

Dear Mr.Jacobs:

Here is a theme for
Mr.Tremblays contrapuntal improvisation.

Excuse the brevity of this
letter:I have to attend so many things.

Cordially yours

Figure 26.2 Arnold Schoenberg's letter to Arthur Leslie Jacobs from 5 March 1942 with a theme for George Tremblay's improvisation. Courtesy Belmont Music Publishers.

There is no audio recording of the performance, but *Los Angeles Times* music critic Isabel Morse Jones reported:

> Mr. Tremblay took a brief look at them [the motifs] and decided what was best to do with them after a moment's hesitation. He combined one by Weiss and another by Toch in a Fugue magnifique. It was grand Bach he made out of these two modernists. Schoenberg he turned into Mozart, and of Achron's theme he built a Beethovian thundering. The audience was convulsed at his final filling, using a Schoenberg theme to make "boogie-woogie." Gershwin seemed to be uppermost in his mind.
>
> *(Jones 1942)*

Schoenberg did not attend the concert, thus we don't know what he thought about Tremblay's endeavor. In America, Schoenberg made a number of positive comments about jazz genres. In 1938, he opined that although swing was a temporary trend and not compatible with modernist art music, it might "possibly influence the higher – or long-time – art in one way or another" (Banks 1937). In 1950, he told an interviewer that he liked to listen to jazz, enjoyed its "peculiar spirit" and "wit" and found much of it very good (Campbell 1950). His American improviser friends and students arguably helped him develop a more differentiated understanding and greater appreciation of jazz genres and styles and of improvisation.

2 Improvisation in Schoenberg's Oeuvre: Rapid Composition

Although Schoenberg was never ready to sacrifice compositional control for performance freedoms, throughout most of his career he liked certain qualities that – for better or worse – are ascribed to improvisation rather than to composition. These include intuition-, inspiration-, and spontaneity-driven activity; directness of expression; speed of the creative process; and certain amounts creative freedom. He stated,

> The excellence of an improvisation lies in its inspired directness and liveliness rather than in its elaboration. Of course the difference between a written and [an] improvised composition is the speed of production, a relative matter.
>
> *(Schoenberg 1969: 175)*

Schoenberg was not known to be a skilled improviser on any instrument. But given the speed with which he notated some of his music, one might suggest that, in a certain sense, he *was* an improviser.[18] Schoenberg admired Franz Schubert and his own teacher and brother-in-law Alexander von Zemlinsky, artists who also created works at lightning speed, and he once declared that composition was "slowed down improvisation" (Schoenberg 1950c: 98). He noted that "often one cannot write fast enough to keep up with the stream of ideas" (ibid.). When discussing his compositional processes, he often insisted that he was a fast writer:

> I personally belong to those who generally write very fast, whether it is "cerebral" counterpoint or "spontaneous" melody […;] it often happens to a composer that he writes down a melody in one uninterrupted draft and with a perfection that requires no change and offers no possibility of improvement […] I composed three-fourths of both the second and the fourth movements of the Second String Quartet in one-and-a-half days each. I completed the half-hour music of my opera *Erwartung* in fourteen days.
>
> *(Schoenberg 1950a: 155)*

Furthermore he suggested that he trusted his instinct. Much like Mozart, he created many works without sketches and drafts and refrained from improving on the music once he had put it on paper intuitively – just as improvisers would have to accept the results of their live performance.[19] He often resisted the advice of his colleagues and mentors to revise his works with responses such as, "One's first instinct is almost always best!"[20]

A case in point are the intensely expressive works Schoenberg created before World War I, 1908–11, when he interacted with Oskar Kokoschka and such artists of the Blaue Reiter group as Nicolai Kulbin and Wassily Kandinsky, who all explored new forms of artistic freedom, spontaneity, and improvisation. Kokoschka allowed for improvisation in the first performance of his plotless play *Mörder, Hoffnung der Frauen* (Murderer, Hope of Womankind) in 1908 in Vienna. In his essay "Die Freie Musik (The Free Music)," Kulbin discussed improvised performance of microtonal music (Kandinsky and Marc 1979: 130–1). Between 1912 and 1917, Kandinsky created many paintings entitled *Improvisation* (Bassie 2014: 60). In his 1912 text *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (On the Spiritual of Art), he distinguished between three types of paintings: improvisations, compositions, and impressions. He characterized his series of *Improvisations*, begun in 1909, as "the largely unconscious, spontaneous expression of inner character, non-material nature;" his *Compositions* as "slowly formed inner feeling, tested and worked over repeatedly and almost pedantically;" and his *Impressions* as "direct impressions of nature, expressed in purely pictorial form" (Kandinsky 1994: 218).

In the early 1900s, Schoenberg's aesthetic ideas seemed very much in line with these artists. In his *Blaue Reiter Almanach* contribution "Das Verhältnis zum Text" (The Relationship to the Text, 1912), he singled out Kandinsky and Kokoschka "whose material and external object is hardly more than a motivation to improvise in colors and forms and to express themselves like musicians have expressed themselves until now."[21] At this time, Schoenberg's compositions and paintings come closest to the ideals of improvisation. Herein he sought to capture and suggest unconscious and spontaneous expression.

The third of Schoenberg's Three Piano Pieces, op. 11 (1909) is a good example of how he realized and suggested direct expression in a rapidly composed short piece that comprises just thirty-five measures. Its overall form is most unusual and can be best understood as a series of "contrasting episodes" or "zones."[22] Small motivic cells of three pitches and two intervals are subjected to much variation in terms of their melodic-harmonic contours (minor seconds and their inversions, non-functional seventh and ninth chords, added-semitone tetra- and pentachords, and quartal harmonies in blocked or broken forms) and expanded and shortened to form units of varying length. He shuns literal repetition and the obvious recapitulation of musical materials.[23] Schoenberg uses utmost variegation in terms of register, timbre, dynamics, texture, rhythm, tempo, and expression to produce strong contrasts. Compare the phrase in the first two measures with the second phrase in the third measure in terms of their differing textures and rhythms, or compare the two phrases of the opening with the four epigrammatic phrases in measures 4–7. Note the vigorous expression of the first six measures in comparison with the calm passages of measures 8–9, 11–3, and 22–3 (see Figure 26.3). The quickly changing phrases and non-tonal harmonies function as colors. Tension builds to briefly reach a climax, but abruptly discontinues to start the process again (measures 16, 19, 21, 28, 30–1). The impression is that of a fluid sequence of unpredictable emotional ups and downs.[24]

In his textbook *Structural Functions of Harmony*, Schoenberg said:

> Generally an improvisation will adhere to its subject more through the exercise of imagination and emotion than of the strictly intellectual faculties. There will be an abundance of themes and contrasting ideas whose full effect is achieved through rich modulation, often to remote regions. The connection of themes of such disparate characters and the control over the centrifugal tendency of the harmony is often achieved only in an incidental manner by local "bridges" and even by abrupt juxtapositions.
>
> *(Schoenberg 1969: 175)*

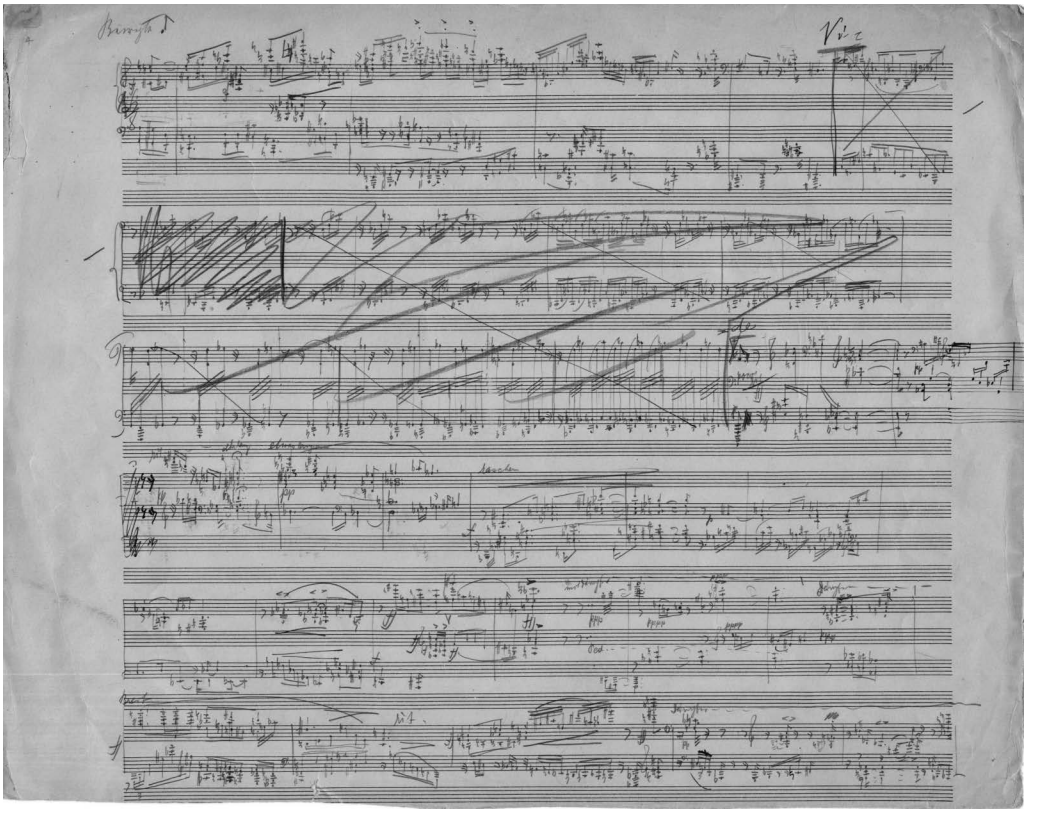


Figure 26.3 Arnold Schoenberg, *Three Piano Pieces*, first of two manuscript pages, first rendering, 7 August 1909. Courtesy Belmont Music Publishers.

Opus 11's third movement has caused controversies among international music scholars, who examined it on the one hand through the lens of "intuitive aesthetics" and on the other hand through the lens of its structural properties, its "short- and long-range motivic and harmonic networks that give it coherence."[25] It seems that Opus 11's third piece offers both: expression of improvisatory "imagination and emotion" through its richly variegated sonic fabric, as well as "strictly intellectual faculties" via its subtle ordered processes for the sake of motivic coherence.

Composer-pianist Ferruccio Busoni who supported Schoenberg's creativity, held improvisation in high regard and famously said, "notation is first and foremost an ingenious expedient to capture an improvisation so that it can be brought back to life again" (Busoni 1916: 20). Likewise, Schoenberg felt that notation was an imperfect form of transcribing music that was rooted in instinct and relayed this idea to Busoni in two letters from August 1909 (Busoni 1987: 389, 392–7):

> To what extent I realize my intentions? Not as far as I would like to. Not one piece has yet satisfied me entirely. I would like to achieve even greater variegation of motifs and figures without melodic character; I would like to be freer and less constrained in rhythm and time signature; freer from repetition of motifs and spinning out of thoughts in the manner of a melody. This is my vision: this is how I imagine music before I notate = transcribe it. And I am unable to force this upon myself; I must wait until a piece comes out of its own accord in the way I have envisaged.
>
> *(Auner 2003: 75 f.)*[26]

However, Busoni was unable to understand Schoenberg's daring Opus 11, and deemed the pieces unpublishable. As is well known, at Schoenberg's dismay, he made an arrangement of the second piece in an effort to improve upon it. But other musicians at that time, including numerous young pianists, saw Opus 11 as a source of inspiration. Perhaps unsurprisingly, Schoenberg's works from this period touched such brilliant and noted African American improvisers and composers as Hale Smith, Cecil Taylor, Anthony Braxton, and James Newton. Braxton recounted his discovery of Schoenberg in the mid-1960s as follows:

> Until that time I had always thought of Western art music as something only relevant to white people; it had nothing to do with me and my life […]. Experiencing Schoenberg ['s Opus 11], however, suddenly made everything more meaningful. […] It opened up the next whole aspect of my life. It affected me in as profound a way as anything has ever affected me.
>
> *(Radano 1993: 73)*

3 Improvisation in Schoenberg's Oeuvre: Evocation of Improvised Traditions

One might not, however, want to take Schoenberg's pre-World War I rhetoric entirely at face value, and understand all of his works from 1908 to 1912 as composed *ex improviso*. Some of them certainly show levels of contemplation, elaboration, and construction hardly achievable in instinctive acts.[27] Nor should we fully endorse his often limited understanding of improvisation as a practice largely precluding complex musical expression and structural coherence.

Schoenberg's fervent embrace of instinctive creativity did not last. As is well known, before the start of World War I, he explored new musical territories, which led to his exploration of twelve-tone composition. In fact, in 1912 he observed:

> Then came the preoccupation with theoretical matters. Doing that very definitely dries one out […]. I have become strangely calm! […] I am missing the aggressive in myself. The spontaneous leaving of all constraints behind oneself and attacking, taking over.[28]

At this time he began to justify the necessity of conscious construction as much as he insisted on the importance of inspiration and direct musical expression in his compositional process. In the 1920s, invoking inspiration became especially vital to him as he had to fight against his public image as a cerebral dodecaphonic composer while his peers – Paul Hindemith, Ernst Krenek, and Kurt Weill, among others – successfully capitalized on direct expression and spontaneity in their jazz and popular-music inflected works and captured both the public spotlight and admiration of young musicians.

Schoenberg emphasized that both heart and brain were needed in the creative process and felt inclined to redefine inspiration, which generally suggests the unconscious, unpredictable, and split-second emergence of an idea. In 1935, he stated that inspiration requires an intellectual basis and time:

> Whether somebody is a good or a poor composer, he can be convinced of the power of his inspiration and the infallibility of his fantasy. May he be conventional or not, he will often feel the need for a conscious control by trustworthy laws and rules, and the desire will arise to employ consciously the means which are subconsciously conceived just as in a dream.
>
> *(Schoenberg 2016a: 251)*

But fighting off such labels as "Theoretiker-Hirn (theorist brain)," "constructionist, engineer, and mathematician," (Schoenberg 1950a: 174) he stressed that he arrived at dodecaphony "without intention, without knowledge, only following [his] instinct, [his] inspiration"

(Schoenberg 2016a: 253 and see Schoenberg's letter to Nicolas Slonimsky, 3 June 1937 in Feisst 2018: 104 f.). He also stated that he "opposed" "[t]he [widespread] idea that the basic set must or can be constructed mathematically […]. It should be invented like any other composition's theme, in character and mood by inspiration" (Schoenberg 2016b: 103). He underscored spontaneity and freedom in his twelve-tone works and soon after composing his dodecaphonic Piano Concerto, his pupil Heinrich Jalowetz published the essay "On the Spontaneity of Schoenberg's Music," discussing this very work (Jalowetz 1944).

Furthermore, in such defensive articles as "Heart and Brain in Music" (1946), Schoenberg suggested that complex counterpoints could be composed quasi "ex improviso" and spontaneous-sounding melodies could be created slowly and meticulously: "[T]the finished work gives no indication of whether the emotional or the cerebral constituents have been determinant […;] everything of supreme value in art must show heart as well as brain" (Schoenberg 1950a: 178 f.). Here Schoenberg implies that spontaneity and the *imprévu*, the unforeseen – regardless of the speed of the compositional process – can be musically constructed or staged![29] It is in fact possible to trace how Schoenberg evoked improvised traditions in both the popular and classical realms in his twelve-tone and tonal music after World War I and to discover how he created an illusion of improvisation.

Throughout the 1920s, Schoenberg subtly alluded to several improvised popular music traditions – without granting performers improvisatory freedom. The Musette of his Piano Suite, op. 25 has rhythmically catchy riffs as can be found in jazz; the first two movements of his Suite for chamber ensemble, op. 29 (1926) feature popular dance rhythms and swing band sonorities; and the dance scene of his comic one-act opera *Von heute auf morgen* (From One Day to the Next, 1929) again references dance rhythms and jazz timbres thanks to its saxophone sounds and vocal humming (mm. 347–54). His *Begleitungsmusik für eine Lichtspielszene* (Accompaniment to a Film Scene) for small orchestra with enlarged percussion, op. 34 (1930) points to the practice of improvised accompaniments for silent films prior to 1915 when codified collections of music for moods and events and cue sheets with themes for improvisatory treatment were common. Its subtitles "Threatening Danger," "Fear," and "Catastrophe," can be found as mood categories in cheat books issued by Hawkes & Son, Schott, and Heinrichshofen's Verlag. Whether all these examples were composed swiftly or slowly cannot be determined, but as reminders of improvised popular traditions they create an effect of surprise, a stereotypical trait of improvisation.

Schoenberg also engaged with improvised traditions in classical music. In the early 1910s he realized basso-continuo parts of four baroque works for publication in Guido Adler's *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich* and, in 1913, with his own experience as a cellist and the skills of the famous Spanish cellist Pablo Casals in mind, composed four virtuosic and emotionally charged solo cadenzas for Monn's Cello Concerto in G minor in three movements, which he called an "artistic experiment."[30] Schoenberg composed two cadenzas for the first and third movements (in each case a long and a short version) before arranging the entire work for cello solo and keyboard complete with a notated realization of its figured bass part, which would have been improvised in Monn's era.[31] Monn did not indicate any specific places for improvised cadenzas in this work as this type of embellishment would have been left to the soloist performing the composition, who – at the time – knew where to conventionally insert them. The first and long version of the cadenza for movement I, beginning in measure 99, displays a rich array of juxtaposed meticulously specified rhythmic-melodic patterns freely referencing the first movement's main subject and showcasing very nuanced dynamics, measured and unmeasured passages, and manifold string performance techniques – all to create the illusion of a 19th-century-style improvisation (Figure 26.4).[32]

Schoenberg had strong opinions about the cadenza. He felt that 19th-century virtuosos who created "recital"-length cadenzas at the end of a concerto movement, "including harmonic and modulatory transformations of the original themes, extensions, reductions, embellishments and

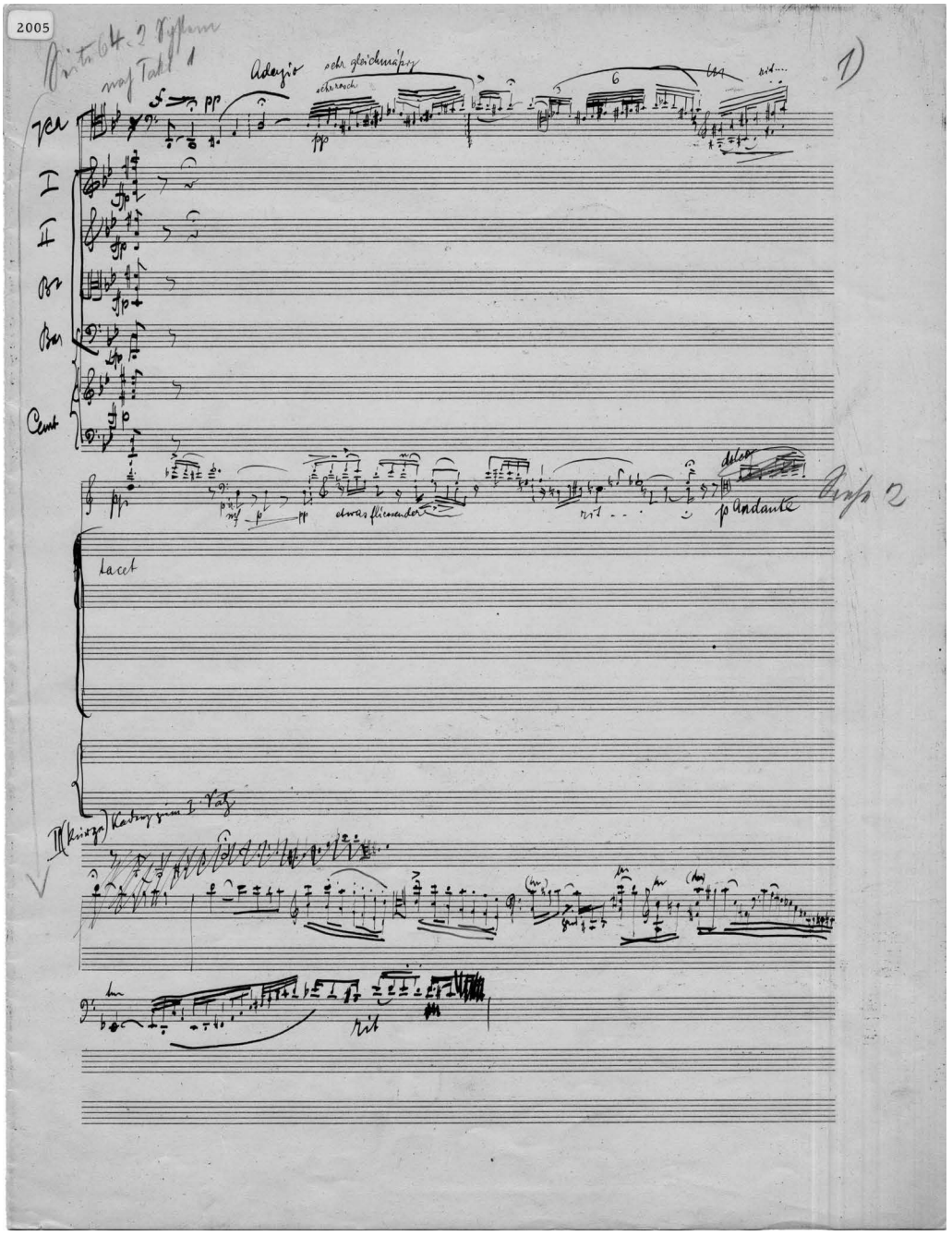


Figure 26.4 Arnold Schoenberg, First Cadenza for Georg Matthias Monn's *Cello Concerto in G Minor*, pages one and two of seven. Courtesy Belmont Music Publishers.

quasi-contrapuntal combinations of imitating or superimposed themes and, above all, many brilliant runs in octaves, thirds, etc." committed "structurally and esthetically great abuse," as they undermined the effect of the six-four chord signaling "the end of all centrifugal motion." He observed that even when "produced by the composer himself [a cadenza] can endanger the stability

of a structure whose variety does not conflict with coherence." In his view, a cadenza "uses thematic material of the whole movement in a manner different from the preceding utilization." A cadenza is structurally different from an exposition or a development section. "[I]t has no functional meaning, because it is not organic and offers an aspect rather like that of a wart or pimple." A cadenza should be created "as long as the stream of inspiration still lasted." He revealed that, in one instance, he "postponed some technical difficulties for the cadenza," composing it before completing the movement (Schoenberg 1950e).

Between 1932 and 1942, Schoenberg wrote four solo concertos, two of which are free adaptations of 18th-century concertos and two of which are original compositions. Each of the four includes written-out cadenzas. While his arrangement of Monn's Cello Concerto in D Major (1932) has only one brief cadenza before the first movement's last ritornello, his String Quartet Concerto after Handel (1933) features a virtuosic cadenza with consecutive octaves in chromatic motion for the four soloists at the end of the first movement and a quasi-cadenza in the third movement's center. His two dodecaphonic Violin Concerto (1936) and Piano Concerto (1942) include composed cadenzas as well. For the piano concerto, which was originally commissioned by Oscar Levant, Schoenberg composed only one cadenza, which he embedded in the Adagio section. But the violin concerto contains four cadenzas: one in the first "Poco Allegro" movement, another in the second "Andante grazioso," and two in the last "Allegro" movement. All of them showcase soloistic violin playing with partial and sparse accompaniment and reference motivic-thematic material of the concerto. Following a very short sonata form recapitulation at the end of the third movement, the last and lengthiest cadenza of the Concerto forms the crowning climax of the concerto (mm. 647–718). Here, Schoenberg chronologically reviews thematic material and dodecaphonic features from each movement, connecting them through free and thematically unrelated passages.[33] He creates a free rhythmic flow through changes of meter and tempo. He juxtaposes contrasting motives, textures, and timbres and moves freely from contemplative to lively expressions. Virtuosic passages are occasionally enhanced with orchestral interjections.[34] Distinguished by highly sophisticated row treatments, this cadenza can nonetheless be seen as a veritable violin fantasy.[35] Indeed, Schoenberg himself emphasized that a "cadenza is usually a 'free fantasia'" (Schoenberg 1950d: 1).

In fact, Schoenberg had a strong interest in the genre of the fantasy and planned to write fantasies several times in his career. After his plans for an organ fantasy (n.d.), a cello fantasy on a Bach piece, and a Phantasia for piano four hands (1937) all had failed to materialize, he finally completed a *Phantasy for Violin with Piano Accompaniment*, op. 47 at the end of his life. With this last completed chamber work, he finally composed in a genre that evoked improvisation, imagination, and creative freedom.

In a discussion of the opening of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, Schoenberg speculated that introductions and phantasies originated in the practice of improvisation, intonation and preluding:

> One can easily imagine that in the course of such an improvisation, whether inspired by a strong mood or, like warmth, merely the result of friction, intensity will have been gradually gained – that thus in the course of improvising, stable ideas are crystallized; and perhaps it is this process that preserves the directness of feeling in Beethoven's compositions, through which he has become the most movingly expressive artist of our era. Also kinship with […] *fantasies* would thereby be shown, and the difference between the two would be that the introduction leads to a *piece* while the fantasy is itself this piece. Neither firmly binds itself to the ideas it exhibits, but an introduction leads to a piece that does so.
>
> *(Schoenberg 1995: 278)*

Elsewhere Schoenberg counted fantasies (along with introductions, preludes, rhapsodies, and recitatives) among the "so-called 'free forms'," but insisted that they did not lack organization (Schoenberg 1969: 167). Because of their "avoidance of a predominant tonality," he said fantasies resemble a development and "enable the player to show his brilliancy, and so contain much effective passage work rather than an abundance of beautiful themes" (Schoenberg 1969: 180).

Commissioned and premiered by violinist Adolph Koldofsky, the *Phantasy*, a short virtuosic piece in one movement, allowed Schoenberg to experiment with unusual forms of musical continuity.[36] In stream-of-consciousness fashion, he frequently changes patterns, textures, timbres, and virtuosic violin performance techniques including glissandos, pizzicatos, harmonics, tremolo effects, arpeggiated chords, and large interval leaps. He alternates between unstable and stable segments, interrupted and interspersed with musical rests, to create a piece "whose unhindered flow is not based on any formal theories," a piece avoiding conventional motivic work and melody.[37] Not unlike Mozart in his Fantasy in C minor KV475, Schoenberg seeks to transcend structural features from sonata form. The initial musical idea is saved until the very last moment and recapitulated in varied form in the Coda. References to the movements of an entire sonata in four parts connected by transitions are fleeting: a section establishing the main motivic material (here a six-measure idea) followed by lento and scherzando sections and a coda. Schoenberg also used dodecaphonic processes and dance-like triple rhythms to create structural coherence and to unify the otherwise variegated musical material.[38]

Despite its immediate expressivity, this piece was not composed at lightning speed, like some of Schoenberg's works before World War I. He made sketches and worked on the composition for about four weeks in spring 1949. But he succeeded in conjuring the most common properties associated with improvisation: unpredictable musical continuity, spontaneity, freedom, a wealth of expression, and virtuosity.[39]

4 Conclusion

Although Schoenberg had mixed feelings about improvisation, he engaged with aspects of it throughout most of his career – in peculiar, yet evolving ways. He saw it as a vital factor in folk and popular music and in classical music of the past. On the one hand, his understanding of improvisation as a practice whose outcomes are ephemeral, unpredictable, and often devoid of deep structural coherence conflicted with his desire to create complex, meticulously controlled, prestigious, and timeless masterpieces. On the other hand, he valued such qualities of improvisation as spontaneity, the speed of the creative process, imaginative and expressive freedom, inventiveness, and production of a wealth of ideas. He sought to incorporate the latter characteristics in his music at various stages in his career, reconciling them with his compositional beliefs in several ways: through realizing improvisation in rapid and instinctive composition without revision ("composition as slowed down improvisation") between 1908 and 1912 and thereafter through subtly evoking improvised popular traditions, through recalling and staging improvised classical practices in his written out cadenzas, and – most fully – in his late *Violin Phantasy*. During his American years, Schoenberg arguably developed a better understanding and appreciation of jazz and inspired improvising musicians associated with jazz, third stream composition and experimentalism such as Larry Austin, Anthony Braxton, Bill Evans, James Newton, Gunther Schuller, and Hale Smith to fuse improvisation with atonality and dodecaphony.

Related Topics

Wilson, A. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Authenticity in Early 20th Century Western Music."

Notes

1 For more on this topic, see Feisst 1995.
2 From December 1901 and July 1902, Schoenberg was music director at Ernst von Wolzogen's cabaret, the Buntes Theater (Überbrettl) in Berlin. In the early 1900s, he arranged music and orchestrated operettas by Robert Fischhof, Adalbert von Goldschmidt, Viktor Hollaender, and Bogumil Zepler. See Simon Frith's distinction between three types of discursive practices: classical or academic music, folk or popular music, and commercial music belonging to the "majority culture," in Frith 1996.
3 Commissioned by musicologist Guido Adler, Schoenberg provided figured bass realizations of works by Mann, Monn, and Tuma for volume 39, *Wiener Instrumentalmusik im 18. Jahrhundert*, of *Denkmäler der Tonkunst in Österreich* (1912). See Schoenberg's preface to his Handel-based String Quartet Concerto in Auner 2003: 241 and his letter to Alban Berg from 28 August 1933 in Brand et al. 2007: 509–10.
4 See, for example, Schoenberg's performance indications for his Second String Quartet, op. 10 (1908) in the copy of Jule Ecorcheville, the editor of *Revue Musicale*, who was planning a performance of the quartet in Paris. The manuscript is housed at the Paul Sacher Foundation in Basle, Switzerland. See also Mattes 2013: 110–1 and Kapp 1990: 106.
5 Listen to Wilhelm Kempff's 1964 recording of Beethoven's *Ecossaise* in E flat Major WoO86 (1965 Deutsche Grammophon LP 138934) prefaced by a short improvised prelude on *YouTube*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XlEnAhfgbNk (accessed November 4, 2020).
6 Schoenberg discussed improvisation in the context of a rhapsody as an "improvisatory construction" (Schoenberg 1969: 175).
7 Thanks to Severine Neff for drawing my attention to this statement.
8 These statements stem from Schoenberg's discussion of music in the 1920s in Schoenberg 1984b.
9 Schulhoff's *Ten Piano Pieces* (1919), *Sami Dva* (1933), and *Optimistische Komposition* (1936) and Milhaud's *L'Homme et son désir* (1918) and *Cocktail aux clarinettes* (1920) are examples that involve improvisation. Andrew Wilson is currently researching these works for his doctoral dissertation at the University of Basel, Switzerland; see Wilson, this volume.
10 Under the pseudonym Allan Gray, Żmigrod wrote such jazz-inflected works as *Swing Doors*, which allows for improvisation and is featured in the American video game *Fallout* (2008). For more information see the chapters on Żmigrod and Goehr, although somewhat anecdotal accounts, in Gradenwitz 1998: 127–42 and 158–68.
11 See the correspondence between Schoenberg and Goehr in Feisst 2018.
12 In 1942, Schoenberg had a brief encounter with Dave Brubeck who considered taking lessons with Schoenberg, but nothing came out of it as Brubeck seemed to dislike Schoenberg's teaching style. See Storb and Fischer 1991: 5–6.
13 An improvised performance of Gershwin's "Ain't She Sweet" by Shilkret's Salon Orchestra and Gene Austin can be found here: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=loQrBwK4tVI (accessed November 5, 2020).
14 See discussions of Levant's improvisations on Gershwin's music in Boyd 2020: 171, 189–90, 202, 206, 260, 270, 295.
15 See Levant's improvisatory skills as pianist and a comedian in the Oscar Levant Show (1958–60) on American TV: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bq036recOOE (accessed November 5, 2020).
16 Listen to: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sgWAChssq0o (accessed November 5, 2020). Similarly Levant also delivered an improvised performance of Chopin's Nocturne in E flat, truncating and embellishing the piece, in Kraft Music Hall on 15 April 1948. In the American radio quiz show *Information Please* off 15 October 1940, Levant was presented with excerpts of Grieg's Piano Concerto and, without previous knowledge or preparation, asked to continue performing them. During Schoenberg's lifetime, Levant also presented an improvisatory version of Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* for solo piano at the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles on 25 July 1950. Thanks to Caleb Boyd for this information and see his dissertation Boyd 2020: 179–81 and 195 f.
17 Arnold Schoenberg to Arthur Leslie Jacobs on 5 March 1942 (Schoenberg 1942): "Dear Mr. Jacobs: Here is a theme for Mr. Tremblay's contrapuntal improvisation. Excuse the brevity of this letter: I have to attend so many things. Cordially yours, Arnold Schoenberg." Library of Congress.
18 Schoenberg's students, including Lou Harrison, Earl Kim, Leon Kirchner, and Dika Newlin, have reported that in classes, Schoenberg could quickly and without premeditation compose music examples that would appropriately illustrate a spontaneously occurring topic in a class discussion, notating them on the blackboard in front of their eyes.
19 Schoenberg told his student Lovina Knight that he "used his themes as the basis for four-part canons which he worked out in his head as he took his daily walk. And gradually the process of formulating,

analyzing, and developing a theme had become instinctive for him, no longer dependent on these more or less mechanical exercises." See Knight 1990: 148.

20 Arnold Schoenberg to Alexander von Zemlinsky, letter of 20 February 1918 in Jenkins 2016: 135. In this letter, Schoenberg defends his original version of his tone poem *Pelleas und Melisande*, op. 5 (1903) against Zemlinsky's proposed condensation of this work.

21 My translation. See the original in Kandinsky and Marc 1979: 74. Also see Dika Newlin's translation in Schoenberg 1950d: 4–5.

22 See Brinkmann 1969: 112–3; and Boss 2015.

23 See Ethan Haimo's insightful discussion of this work in Haimo 2006: 332–44.

24 Listen to Schoenberg student Edward Steuermann's historic 1957 recording of Schoenberg's Three Piano Pieces: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T4iM62WVQpc (accessed November 5, 2020).

25 See Boss 2015; and Auner 1989: 103–28.

26 Similarly, in 1911 Schoenberg wrote about Liszt and emphasized that "the perfected work of the great artist, is produced, above all, by his instincts; and the sharper ear he has for what they say, the more immediate the expression he can give them, the greater his work is" (Schoenberg 1984c: 442).

27 See, for instance, the first three movements from Five Orchestral Pieces, op. 16.

28 See his diary entry from 12 March 1912 in Schoenberg 1974: 34, translated in Auner 2003: 112.

29 Cf. Landgraf 2011: 84–108.

30 See Schoenberg's correspondence with Guido Adler and with Pablo Casals (Schoenberg 1987; Ennulat 1991).

31 The arrangement was published in *Denkmäler* in 1914, but Schoenberg's cadenzas were not included. Adler thought that, in regards to historically informed performance practice, they were too long. See Guido Adler to Arnold Schoenberg, letters of 12 and 16 April 1913 (Ennulat 1991: 111). Casals never performed Schoenberg's cadenzas because he found them not idiomatic enough and too difficult to play, and, thus, planned to create his own versions. See Pablo Casals to Guido Adler, letter of 2 July and 15 October 1913 (Ennulat 1991: 139, 141).

32 Michael Bach premiered Monn's Cello Concerto with two of Schoenberg's cadenzas with the Orchestra of the Beethovenhalle under Georg Schmöhe in Bonn, Germany in 1987. The autographs of the cadenzas were discovered in Schoenberg's estate in 1957 and published in 1977. Bach recorded the concerto with the SWR Symphony Orchestra under Kasper de Roo. Listen to Bach's performance of the first long cadenza: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r7OJeQJR1tI (accessed November 5, 2020). In 1938 Schoenberg conveyed to cellist Emanuel Feuermann that he wanted to "arrange one or several of the cello sonatas by Bach […] for cello and orchestra," intending to "intersperse one or several [more] cadenzas (ad libitum, of course)." See Ennulat 1991: 201. After completing only five measures of Bach's Sonata for Viola Gamba and Keyboard in G Major (BWV 1027), Schoenberg abandoned this project.

33 For an analysis of the twelve-tone techniques used in both solo concertos see Allegant and Mead 2012: 107–36.

34 Listen to Hilary Hahn's rendition of this cadenza in a recorded performance with the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra under Esa-Pekka Salonen (24:48–28:56) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_ukPsvh51hI (accessed November 5, 2020).

35 See Holzer 2002: 20.

36 Koldofsky collected manuscripts of music by Carl Philip Emanuel Bach, whose creativity is strongly associated with improvisation and the genre of the fantasy, and researched, performed, and recorded his compositions.

37 Arnold Schoenberg to Josef Rufer, letter of 5 February 1951 (Schoenberg 1951). In this letter, Schoenberg refutes the idea that this piece is a "free variation of the first six measures."

38 For a detailed discussion see Schmidt 2004: 284–300.

39 Listen to the 1968 Columbia Masterworks recording of violinist Israel Baker and pianist Glenn Gould's performance of Schoenberg's *Phantasy*: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iye0oXMDIGA (accessed November 4, 2020).

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27

REPEATABILITY VERSUS UNREPEATABILITY IN FREE IMPROVISATION

Thomas Gartmann

HK: I imagine that for me personally there will be evenings where musically I'll have the feeling: Shit, I'm repeating myself, it cheeses me off. I can't always present new material, but I can present it, musically, in different ways [and contexts]. There will be evenings where I'll have the feeling: I want to do this performance like yesterday's. But usually that doesn't work. There will be such evenings. That can be frustrating, but a musician has to live with that. [The free jazz bass player] Peter Kowald once said, if you do *one* good concert a year, that's great. Whatever that means [9:00–9:39].[1]

The ban on repetition is one of the most important dogmas of free improvisation. This taboo can be explained with the paradox that improvisation means inventing something in the moment, and you can invent something only once. So it presents a constant challenge – especially if you are successful in an improvisation, and would like to repeat your success and the joyfulness of the experience that comes from the flow of it. One could also take Peter Kowald's statement to extremes and say that it's not just "good concerts" that are rare; even those concentrated moments when everything "clicks" are rare too. This is especially true for longstanding bands whose members have been playing with each other for years, and who know how each other reacts in any circumstances. There is yet another pitfall here, which one might classify as both a dogma and a taboo: intention. Free improvisation is not "intentional" music.

Given this state of affairs, the musicians in question do not aim to repeat either a "good concert" or a joyful moment. Instead, they try to create the ideal circumstances that can make such concerts and such moments possible in the first place. Koch-Schütz-Studer had been Switzerland's leading improvisational trio for decades when they tried an experiment in September 2005 that one might justifiably describe as crazy: playing concerts of free improvisation as a trio for thirty evenings, one after the other, featuring two sets of forty minutes each on every night, in a venue designed specifically for them. The abovementioned bans on repetition and on intention seem here to run counter to their very intention to *avoid* repetition every evening for a whole month.

This venture was experimental in several ways – in fact, it was almost scientific in its requirements:

1 It had an experimental design under controlled conditions.
2 It had a fixed setting, in the same venue with the same duration. These unities were almost Aristotelian, though the third was absent here – that of a unified plot. On the contrary, producing something different every evening proved one of their biggest challenges.

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"Repetition" was provided by having the same setting every evening, but it was explicitly forbidden in the content (see dogma no. 1 above).

3 What did change each night were the listeners – and this is of crucial importance because improvised music also entails interacting with the audience. Here, however, we also have to relativize things. Some fans came regularly to the concerts, and several journalists were also present on several evenings, precisely in order to experience and enjoy their diversity.

4 Self-reflection: the investigators and the investigated parties were identical here – i.e., the Trio, who were their own producers. This experiment made self-reflection almost a prerequisite – as a statement towards journalists, and as an exchange of ideas with the public (with whom they sat together and drank together more than was already customary), and with those making a film of the event.

5 The most important element here was the fact that the experiment was documented – twice over in act, as audio recordings and on video, though while sound recordings were made of all the concerts, only selected evenings were filmed. The CD[2] and the film that resulted were not purely documentary in nature, however, but (as we shall see) themselves an act of "composition" *sui generis*, as they were edited to form a kind of montage.[3] The CD and film are 61'09" and 72' long respectively, and are, thus, roughly the same length as a dual set on one of the nights in question.

6 Part of the experiment was also the participatory observer – in this case, the author of the present essay, who attended the performance on 20 September 2005. What remains in the memory are the striking moments of surprise as well as the pronounced feeling of large-scale arcs of suspense (two aspects that seem contradictory, but aren't), then the degree of concentration, the incredible focus, the quiet and the electric energy; then there was the venue with its low stage. It is rare for musicians to be so close to their audience, which led to a sense of unity between them – not least because so many musician colleagues sat in the audience. For example, Irène Schweizer and Phil Minton were visible among the public, both of them exponents of free jazz – as were other colleagues of the Trio who had performed with them on occasion.

My reminiscences of this exceptional musical event, however, are qualified by the considerable chronological distance between now and then; I must also take into account the fact that I listened to the CD and watched the DVD two years after the event. So my memories of it are, by necessity, somewhat skewed. At a distance, the memory improvises too.

1 Location

The venue of the experiment was the former Nenniger locksmith's workshop on the Pfingstweidstrasse in what was at the time a new cultural biotope in the western part of the city of Zurich, close to Christoph Marthaler's Schiffbau Theatre, the Maag Event Hall and the jazz club "Moods." Organizing such an event in this part of the city, which was notable for its dynamic cultural and party scene, was in itself a real statement of intent. The workshop, where previously heavy machinery, piping and metal parts had been produced, signified materiality itself, iron and labor, and had an impressive, cathedral-like acoustic. The artist's duo "Buffet für Gestaltung" had completely revamped the venue, however, staging it as a mixture of black box, bar and factory club. The club that was reinvented here seemed to harken back to the myth of the clubs in the USA with their long-term resident artists and their clouds of smoke (this was also before the no-smoking law). But the aesthetic of the venue was that of an art space, and it was stringent in form: there was a semi-circle that meant the audience could get right up close to the stage, and everything was in black. Even the audience was dressed in an existential black, allowing for no distractions – though it was all well-lit,

with a high degree of concentration and focus as a result. The exclusivity of the event – indeed, its near "cult"-like quality – came from the fact that the club was constructed solely for this one month experiment, specifically for this Trio. Afterwards, it was revamped as an art space and was later dismantled altogether. "The idea for this," says Hans Koch, "was something that came to us during a US tour. We wanted to open something along the lines of a club in which only we would play. And then it would close again afterwards" (Amstutz 2005).

But the space in question was not just a club and a workshop: it was also an arena in which the musicians were completely exposed, rather like gladiators, for the audience to experience all their wheezing and their sweat.

The resultant documentation is something unique that enables us to analyze the phenomenon of free improvisation both as myth and as dogma. It would be incorrect to assume, however, that these recordings could enable us to experience the paradox of the repeatability of what is unique and unrepeatable – a documentation of improvisation, in other words – because both the CD and the film are not mere reproductions or a documentation of what happened, but structured reflections of it. They are new versions of the events, created by means of selection and montage and that follow their own dramaturgy – that of CD or of film. Unlike Walter Benjamin's dictum that technological reproduction deprives the artwork of its aura (Benjamin 1936), these audio and video recordings – which, for their part, are "repeatable" at will – acquire their own cultic character (inasmuch as we accord them the status of "works"), not least thanks to their manner of presentation, for the video sequences have been expanded by adding interviews, thus offering self-reflection and self-projection too. Even if these interviews show the musicians as very taciturn, they come across as all the more authentic for it.

2 Fitting People

FS: I've played in plenty of good bands, but I think this is the best one. Usually with bands it's like this: the music is right but the people aren't. This might sound superficial. Or it's the other way round, the people are right but the music isn't. And in this case both are right and that's a rarity [2:00–2:24].

Fitting people: besides the venue and the setting, getting the right "fit" of people is another prerequisite for success. The better people know each other, the freer they can play; mutual experience creates trust. But how should the group of "test subjects" be constituted? In the case of Koch-Schütz-Studer, the three men are as different as one could imagine in terms of their artistic and biographical backgrounds. They mix academic training with the autodidactic, and free music with jazz, rock and theatre music.

Hans Koch was born in 1948 in Biel, and trained first as a classical clarinetist. He only brought his conventional career in an orchestra to a close in the 1990s. His background includes new music, free music and an intense interest in non-European cultures. He often plays solo, but also plays in chamber ensembles. His range of instruments is correspondingly broad, encompassing bass and contrabass clarinets, the soprano and tenor saxophones, electronics and sampling – though he needs his glasses for the last of these activities. The cellist Martin Schütz (*1954) also comes from Biel and also has experience of the free music scene. He has played live theatre music for the directors Luc Bondy and Christoph Marthaler and and has composed film music, including for Peter Liechti (*Grimsel* 1990; *Marthas Garten* 1997), the director of the video of the event under discussion here. His instruments are an acoustic cello and an electric 5-string cello, electronics and sampling. While these two men are rather introverted, their percussionist Fredy Studer has a completely different personality. Like Koch, he too was born in 1948. He only joined up with his two colleagues in 1990. He knows the director Liechti through the films *Hans im Glück* (2003)

and *Namibia Crossing* (2004). Studer is self-taught as a drummer and grew up in jazz and rock; he also co-founded the jazz/rock group OM. He plays drums and other percussion instruments. However different the backgrounds may be of these three men, they have a common interest in improvisation and in experimentation. They have also all played in duos for decades; they have another point of contact in their work with computers and electronics. What's more, they are all true performing types, with a love of theatre. And they also complement each other well in human terms. The Trio is bound together not just by music, but by a deep sense of friendship.

MS: Whenever we play together, I realize that it's a great constellation, even though we have known each other for such a long time. Hans and I, we have known each other even longer, for over 20 years. Nevertheless, it always seems fresh. And at the same time there is a natural blind trust that you can just slip into the flow and know that you can be sure that whatever anyone contributes will be respected and will be taken seriously. That you can risk putting yourself out on a limb, far out – and not be left behind. I believe that this trio's music always works out best when we take a step back, so to speak, and just let the music flow [34:04–35:01].

Knowing each other, and having common experiences, trust and mutual respect – all these are a basis for successful improvisation. A band that works together regularly, thus, has an advantage over any "improvised," ad-hoc ensemble. Ultimately, there is the fourth man too – the man at the mixing desk. Depending on availability, this is either Jean-Claude Pache or Daniel Schneider, who also runs the nearby jazz club "Moods."

The participants saw their whole project as a kind of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a "total work of art," in which everyone made his own contribution. This is evident not least from the designations of the tracks, which don't have titles but the concert date and the names of those involved – whether a dedication to the two sound technicians (Daniel resp. Jean-Claude for the track 9/10), or to the manager, the owner of the Schlosserei, the video man, the team behind the bar and so on – laying open a whole network of relationships.

The ritual of their rigidly fixed, repeatable experiment under controlled conditions – inasmuch as these conditions could be controlled at all – aims to turn a performance into an artwork. These expectations are intensified by the abovementioned, almost "cultic" *mise-en-scène* that was further exaggerated by the fact that it was announced publicly during the performances that they were being documented on CD and film, thereby confirming the artistic ambition of the venture.

We should not confuse the experimental set-up with any sense of the musicians simply "experimenting" here; what's more, any such public experimentation would have been utterly contrary to the expectations of the audience, as Martin Schütz has confirmed:

MS: I think it's far too much to expect from the audience that the musicians just come to practice. The word "experimental" is off the mark. On stage you don't experiment, on stage you play [22:06–22:18].

The Trio's improvisation was, thus, the exact opposite of practicing or rehearsing, which would in any case to a certain extent be counterproductive to the idea of improvisation, which seeks precisely what is unexpected and unintended. In this sense, if an "experiment" signifies merely "experimenting," then improvisation is no experiment. Fredy Studer sums this up aptly by contrasting the rehearsal with the performance, while at the same time contradicting the widespread myth that improvising takes place without any rehearsals:

FS: You could put it another way: It is not about trying something out in public. No, never! There's no point in that. If I can't think of the rest either "Trying out" is something we do,

> e.g., during a practice week […] where absolutely nobody gets to listen. It's sometimes a very painful experience when you listen to what you've recorded. Then you think: That's only as far as we've got [22:29–23:00].

On the other hand, it is clear that automatisms and flexibility in spontaneous decision-making can only be founded on years of experience and intensive rehearsal, for this provides a basis on which you can fall back in the moment, as Alessandro Bertinetto remarked: "Decisional routines are often procedurally embodied thanks to repeated training and become automatic" (Bertinetto 2012: 122, n. 2).

3 Emptiness

Another prerequisite for being able to realize the idea of a spontaneous improvisation is "emptiness." The starting point of every free improvisation is the paradox of an intentionally unintentional emptiness, as Martin Schütz has explained:

> MS: It starts to be hard when I have to do something with intent. It is very important to me in improvisation that what is not intentional, that things just happen. I get myself into a certain state of mind and in this condition it flows – the ideas flow, also the decisions flow, you don't have to make a decision, the decision just happens to you. I need to feel empty. When I go on stage, there must be emptiness. I can't go straight from the shopping centre to the stage. That's impossible, isn't it? [6:28–7:14]

It is difficult to achieve this lack of intention, and there are different dimensions to it – psychological, philosophical and almost dogmatic, or even religious.

Later in Liechti's film, Studer and Koch also speak about how you shouldn't think while improvising, because you're not free when you're thinking, and if you rein in the music, it can't flow properly. "In *30xTRIO* we were concerned with just this music that is generated out of nothingness; by registering nothing but time, it enables the audience to forget about time itself," as the journalist Irene Genhart put it (Genhart 2006: 48).

There are several things here that are noteworthy. First, you can't switch directly from your everyday life to performing on stage. Indirectly, this means that you need some kind of caesura, a framework in which to perform. Secondly, you need a *conscious emptiness* that you actively have to create. You have to "empty" yourself in order to play. Thinking is "forbidden"; you have to "cancel out" yourself. In this, the musicians are strict with themselves, pursuing this ascetic of emptiness with an iron will: "You have to empty yourself mentally and forget about the previous concert, because otherwise you start to censor yourself. We insist on it being new every time" (Bosshard 2005).

So where can we situate our observations in historical, theoretical terms? In Western Europe, and especially in Switzerland, with its highly active improvisation scene, there still existed unshakeable ideological positions some twenty or thirty years ago that in recent years have been almost impossible to maintain. This paradigm shift was subjected to extraordinarily fierce debate and reflection after the publication of an article by Thomas Meyer with the polemical title – "Is free improvisation at an end? On the past and the present of a fleeting art form" (a title invented by the editor of the journal, not by Meyer). His carefully formulated hypothesis prompted others to disagree with him: "Perhaps the accents have actually shifted," he wrote,

> and the act of liberation that was central in the 70s and 80s has receded so much into the background that some musicians, like Jacques Demierre, prefer to place the concept of "freedom"

> after that of "responsabilité," to signify a desire to take responsibility for everything. Freedom solidifies into a lack of it, if it only gazes at its own navel.
>
> *(Meyer 2010: 8)*

In free improvisation, there are indeed numerous taboos, though most of them are only implicit. "What are the taboos and totems of improvised music?" – this is the challenge issued by the saxophonist Bertrand Denzler. However, several improvisers point out that most of their dogmas are things of the past, and are now obsolete: "The dogmas of free, improvised music belong to the last millennium; it's become much freer since then," claims the tuba player Marc Unternährer, for example. "We don't want to reach a point where we have to *liberate* ourselves from the dogmas of free improvisation as you seem to understand them, like the free jazz musicians had to at the end of the 1960s," adds the percussionist Lucas Niggli. The visual artist Miriam Sturzenegger, however, situates the problem in historical terms:

> Free improvisation was an ideology back then, one for which you gave everything. This is the urgency that the article wrote about – the revolution that is over. […] Free improvisation as an ideology, as it was lived out back then, is over today.

And the cellist Alfred Zimmerlin sums it up as follows: "We are happy that we can concentrate completely on the music today, without any ideological ballast and without having to be revolutionaries" (discussion in *Dissonance* online, 2010).

In theoretical terms, the abovementioned commandment of emptiness is founded in a concept of *nothingness*. The British guitarist Derek Bailey has an apt metaphor for this act of creating out of nothing, as well as for the vanity of ever hoping to "capture" an improvisation: "[I]t really is like sand, you have to make it stick, naturally it doesn't stick, you can just form it and then it's gone and I think that's a great attraction. I think to make it stick is actually a kind of heresy" (Scott 1988).

Many improvisers see this in more dogmatic terms, however. For example, Richard Scott insists that

> improvisation has to escape its own idiomatic history and identity as surely as it needs to escape from other genres. If it is to be "free," then free improvisation needs somehow also to be free from itself. It thereby contains an innate negation and a certain pull towards a kind of nothingness or no-thingness.
>
> *(Scott 2014: 5)*

We should also see this emphatic nothingness as a political stance typical of the post-1968 era of negation. At the same time, however, we have to bear in mind Deleuze's dictum of the "Empty Man in a Full Space": "An empty space, without characters (or in which the characters themselves show the void) has a fullness in which there is nothing missing" (Deleuze 1989: 245).

Already on the empty stage, the improviser stands within the context of his own previous concerts:

> He doesn't necessarily need to *invent* anything or to impose anything on the blankness of the stage, because there is no blank empty space patiently awaiting his actions to give it meaning in the first place. Even an empty stage is already a play of forces. The space he walks onto is already full, pregnant with its own plurality of directions and gravities, which are quite apart from, and yet inseparable from, those that may be encapsulated within the body of the performer.
>
> *(Scott 2014: 9)*

It is precisely in order to avoid this heavy burden of tradition and social expectations that a new space was created for this project (and only for this). This helped to "radicalize" the improvisations inasmuch as the space itself was also developed *ex nihilo*. It thereby provided the ideal conditions for improvisation according to Michele Biasutti's definition, which itself referred back to the "real-time music" of the Berlin scene of the mid-1990s onwards: "Music improvisation could be defined as the real-time creative performance of novel music and consists of inventing music extemporaneously" (Biasutti 2017: 1).

But what exactly does this mean? Marcello Ruta states that the notion of free improvisation is in conflict with the idea of implementing a pre-defined normative sound structure; so the use of prefabricated materials contradicts the principle of improvisation, not least on etymological grounds: "The […] meaning of *improvviso* (not foreseen – done in the moment) seems in fact to exclude the use of pre-established sound-structures, or performing instructions, as a *rule to be followed*" (Ruta 2017: 518). In our case, we could add that the samples are prefabricated, but were recorded in the moment and are being applied to a new context, and are, thus, also improvised.[4]

4 Start

The initial question as to who is going to start a new piece is one that implicitly requires a decision, though it is always taken in the moment and may never be prepared in advance.

MS: How shall we start today? That's the most difficult part of the evening, how to start.
FS: That's exactly it. We could say: He'll start with a solo or we'll start loudly together. Whatever. So far we never had the feeling we've got to plan it, and I think that's a great quality. After 22 nights we still don't feel we have to talk about how we'll start. 3 or 4 years ago it always went like this: You start on your own. Or: Martin starts on his own. "Some sounds!!" Yes, that's what we used to do. Then suddenly we stopped doing it [44:02–44:45].

Given this absence of intention, how to begin a new piece is one of their biggest challenges. The keyword, "Some sounds!!" by Martin Schütz is to be understood literally: their music simply emerges out of some sounds or other.

The transitions in all this are fluid. Sometimes the sounds come from the distortion box, sometimes from a sizzling hi-hat and sometimes the latter is imitated by the voice. It becomes truly unintentional when a sound action begins outside the scope of the Trio and their sphere of influence. It might be a member of the audience lighting a cigarette, someone filling a water glass, the laughing of the bartender or the noise of a fan – any of these can trigger something new:

MS: Music begins right here with a ventilator like this one. There's loads of music in that thing. At first it got on my nerves, I wanted it to be absolutely quiet in here. Then I said to myself: It really is very hot in here [11:20–11:50].

While such "natural" sounds expand the sound spectrum beyond the scope of the instrumental, the computer also has a comparable role to play, precisely because not every manipulation enables the resulting sounds and noises to be predicted or plannable. The aesthetic, formal processes and sounds thus reflect the world of electronic music, to such an extent that the Trio was able to integrate sounds from the then-current New York DJ scene into their live electronics. In this regard, Hans Koch said:

HK: The whole set up with computers and instruments is very important of course. I try to make sounds on the instruments like I do on the computer. It interests me to see how far I can go.

> I'm starting to like the computer as much as an instrument. I keep trying to get right into the sounds [5:25–5:54].

5 Decisions

Ending a piece or a development is similarly difficult to beginning it, precisely because it means making a decision again – as we can see in the following dialogue between Martin Schütz and Fredy Studer:

> MS: Today, with that groove, somehow you let that go on far too long. I know… I nearly went mad. That's because Studer wants to hear it. Yes, alright. I thought whenever is he going to stop? It crossed my mind afterwards as well. A bit late, but it doesn't matter. No. I felt fine doing it. I asked myself, is he so in love with that thing that he can't stop? I was miles away, I didn't hear it. […] FS: But you know, talking about hesitating or a clear decision, I once said in an interview or such like: With Hendrix, I simply don't hear any hesitating, they are clear decisions. I know what you mean… MS: when you criticize hesitation. FS: That happens to me, too, I know what it's like. When you improvise, that can happen. And if that happens a lot, and during a concert, then it will be horrifying. Then I wish for a rock band on stage that knows: We'll play *this* song! Of course, you were right to say what you did about Hendrix because, he was simply a *musician*. I don't think hesitating was ever an option for him, then of course you must consider: We are all over 50 now. At the time you're talking about he was… 26! [38:08–40:12]

The three men each ensure that the very opposite of anything "comfy" or "fun" occurs. Radicalism is what drives them, ensuring that longer moments of beauty are immediately stifled, islands of comfort are disturbed, and chains of suspense are rent asunder. All these taboo things are allowed to occur – but not for too long, especially when their free improvisation advertises itself as non-idiomatic and non-referential as a matter of principle (Demierre 2010). In this, however, the Trio reveals itself to be pretty undogmatic, far removed even from the "nothingness" postulated by Scott above (2014: 5). Here, in an ideal postmodern manner, we repeatedly find all manner of stylistic borrowings. According to one's listening experiences, one sometimes seems to hear snippets of rock, or an overtone-rich, esoteric-sounding mood, while at other times the music sounds like klezmer or one perceives an electronic bustling or jazzy sounds, through-composed grooves, and even the hardest of metal riffs. This free improvisation is by no means completely unidiomatic; it's more a kind of polystylism. Even bits and pieces of classical music can be heard, like a rolling "basso continuo" or a repeated ostinato. Other listeners are reminded of the Jamaican reggae sound engineer King Tubby, who played a major role in the development of dub. Sometimes it's the obsessiveness with which they work at their material – in both a musical and a physical sense – while at other times it's their sheer joy in virtuosity that is put on show here. And at other times, they succeed in sounding more like some kind of intermezzo, though we naturally don't know if all this really sounded like that in the concert, or whether it is the result of montage.

"The first few days ran like on autopilot, and now we start to ask ourselves things like 'have I already played that?'", Schütz remarked (Bosshard 2005), and Koch told to the present author after a concert: "The first five concerts were exciting. Only the first Sunday proved difficult, because we had to play in Willisau [at the jazz festival] on the afternoon." The additional matinée performance at a festival intensified the problem of not repeating themselves, because they were playing twice on the same day and had to try and keep a clear head, even though they were tired. This was all the more important because the commandment to innovate is an unwritten law of improvising: "There's an urge always to play the newest material – the material that hasn't yet

been composed" (Amstutz 2005); we shall hereafter delve further into the relationship between improvisation and composition.

An improviser is faced with the same dilemma as the boy in Heinrich Kleist's novella *Das Marionettentheater*, who elegantly pulls a thorn out of his foot: his movement in the mirror looks so graceful to him that he would like to repeat it, but this in itself means he loses his spontaneity, and, thus, also the innocence and naturalness of the act. What Kleist requires in this metaphor of the puppet master is also true of improvising. One's consciousness has to be switched off, because it acts immediately as a kind of censor. In such moments, a feeling can emerge that is not actually recognized, but is felt as something fluid, as "flow":

FS: The moment it happens, what counts is: If you have 3 grooves one after the other – fuck it, then that's it, then you simply have to work your arse off! Yes, I mean it. I do agree with you. At moments like these I can say so [28:28–28:50].

6 Flow

In an earlier study by the present author, "flow" is repeatedly mentioned in interviews as a by-product of a good working atmosphere. For example, a cellist has described such moments as a subjective experience that is perceived as a mutual interaction with the audience:

> So there are these flow situations, where you have the feeling that something is flowing through you and it reaches the people who are there. I'd describe that as an optimum concert. You don't really even feel yourself anymore, because you just dissolve in the thing. […] For me, it's these flow moments. I think these moments where you feel that something or other is emerging that you couldn't completely prepare – both through playing together and through the audience that hears something and thereby also intervenes in the whole performance.
>
> *(Gartmann et al. 2019: 352 f.)*

The prerequisites for "flow" experiences can be summed up as individual excellence, a successful attentiveness in a team that manifests itself as mutual trust, active support of processes that unfold and anticipating subsequent actions. Flow experiences can point to a high level of performance, or can support such a performance through the way in which they provide individual recompense. Mutual flow experiences are regarded as a "gateway to increased creativity" (Marotto et al. 2007: 388). Flow and the act of its production have a circular impact; in fact, they stimulate each other in a mutual fashion, like a spiral. "Flow can enhance improvisation inducing a sense of spontaneity and a natural flow of musical ideas" (Biasutti 2017; cf. Csikszentmihalyi 1990).

But this spontaneity can only develop like this when it is not forced. Awareness and thinking are further taboos of improvisation because they deprive one of the absolute freedom of the moment to act out of the moment, as it was claimed by the musicians for ideological reasons.

HK: It's risky when you start speaking about something like that. It may be good, but on the other hand it's shit because the next time you play, your mind [Bewusstsein] is aware and remembers. Then you start thinking, and then you start to censor. And you take huge steps backwards. Thinking is your worst enemy in a situation like this. I don't think that much. You must do, you wouldn't be so articulate otherwise. It's all about wanting to make progress. No, you don't make the progress like that. With dogmas you don't make progress. FS: That's not what I mean. It's actually a way of saying: I don't like it when you do that. That's not what I'm saying. The next time that situation comes up. And you realize you would like to open the window, but you remember: Shit, no, he doesn't like it, he feels the draught on his neck

> that's complete shit because that's where the problems start then there's simply no freedom anymore [28:50–30:09].

7 "Recordings of Improvisations Repeat the Unrepeatable" (Bertinetto 2012: 121)

"Musical performance is an ephemeral and unrepeatable event," confirms Bertinetto. On the one hand, "the improvisational process *per se* is singular, unrepeatable and incorrigible" (Bertinetto 2012: 106), but on the other, repetitions of individual turns of phrase or sounds are also implicitly forbidden. Marcello Ruta describes the unrepeatability of an event as one of the primary characteristics of improvisation:

> If we refer, however, to musical improvisation as *performed action*, rather than as performed sonic structure, it seems that unrepeatability turns out to be an appropriate property to characterise it. […] *Free improvisations, as musical events, are per definition unrepeatable*.[5]

These statements are as insightful as they are unambiguous. Our experimental project is so special because the whole *process* is repeated within it – thirty times differently, but all under the same "laboratory conditions." And thanks to the video, the different instances of this process can even be compared – at least in part. The notion of differentiating in improvisation between process and product is helpful, and comes from Alessandro Bertinetto: Action is not the result (Bertinetto 2012: 113). Here, however, we have to differentiate things, as he also admitted later, and rightly so: "Post-production manipulations of the recorded material are the rule" (Bertinetto 2012: 120).

This is true in our case study to an even greater degree, because the production process did not just comprise improving the sound quality of the recording, but also involved editing and assembling the recordings anew, with the individual excerpts being chosen in a far more selective manner than is the case with "normal" recording sessions and recording situations. When Bertinetto remarks that "Only the result of an improvisation can be frozen, defrosted and tasted repeatedly" (Bertinetto 2012: 121), by "result" he means the product – the acoustic result. In our case, it is interesting that the reverse is true. The product is a montage that is far from being any sonic image of what was played; instead, the product here is the *process* that was captured in excerpts, and thereby made repeatable.

The paradox that we can use recordings to make the unrepeatable repeatable is a problem that is solved by Bertinetto inasmuch as he denies it the character of an improvisation: "The music that we are listening to in the recording is not the improvisation, but its sonic image that attests to its unrecoverable vanishing." Instead, he promises a kind of transformation: "Radical ontological transformation (from live improvisation to recorded improvisation) converts the unrepeatable music played into an item (ideally) repeatable without loss of identity in multiple performances, which are (tendentially) all identical or aurally very similar)" (Bertinetto 2012: 121). With "very similar," he probably means that the recordings in question are available on different media – normally audio media. These different representations (in our case on CD or DVD) make possible the ontological transformation from music improvisation to musical work.

Thus, CD and video present us with two very different forms of the paradox inherent in composed improvisation. In his funding application for his film, the director Peter Liechti acknowledged that the special nature of his idea becomes manifest here: "[…] to listen to the TRIO is also to participate in a process." In retrospect, he remarks that only the film can record and play back the live event:

> The exciting directness and the sensuality of this music are essentially only conveyed if you are physically present for it – or through the specific medium of film, which in a best-case

> scenario can intensify it. It is one of the privileges of film that it can be edited: we can shorten the circuitous, at times strenuous or perhaps even boring path of an improvised concert so as to reduce it to its highpoints – without leaving out the creative struggle to get there.[6]

What's more, such fixed improvisations can also serve as objects of study, rather like written transcriptions: "like recordings, transcriptions are not improvisations anymore, [… they are] tools for studying past improvisations and for learning how to improvise" (Bertinetto 2012: 124, note 18). Here, however, engaging with these objects is so interesting because the process itself is reflected upon and documented, meaning we can study this process, too, to a certain extent.

Audio recordings of improvisations can also be regarded critically, precisely because of their ontological metamorphosis. David Grubbs has expressed skepticism about the transformation from improvisation to composition, as he has written in an expanded context:

> […] the practice of improvisation yields performances of improvised music; performances of improvised music become recordings; these recordings, through the process of being designated with a title and composer, become compositions; and improvisers, for better or worse, become recording artists.
>
> *(Grubbs 2014: 110)*

It is for this reason – which is also ideological – that certain musicians such as the AMM Collective reject recordings out of hand, while Jacques Demierre once remarked both rightly and categorically that "improvised music dies in every concert" (Demierre 2010). Repeated listening does not lead to added value in the listening experience, believes Demierre, but on the contrary, it leads to atrophy (Badrutt 2021). In order to find our way out of this dilemma, which is widespread on the improvisation scene, the British guitarist Derek Bailey proposed incorporating the dimension of the listener, saying: "If you could only play a record *once*, imagine the intensity you'd have to bring into the listening" (Watson 2004: 424). Bailey's approach, thus, endeavors to reclaim for the listener of audio recordings that uniqueness that is inherent in improvisation, and thereby preserve it.

To have the imagination to be able to listen to an audio recording but a single time should be understood as a provocative means of contrasting the unique, unforgettable experience of being at a live concert with listening to music on a sound recording – an act that can be repeated to the point of reaching inattentiveness. Bailey understands this uniqueness as an apt manner of listening, because free improvised music is solely committed to the moment, and when it is preserved as an audio recording it is transferred into a different materiality. By "pinning it down" in an audio recording, its meaning and its impact are dissipated. This is especially the case when one listens to it repeatedly, which is why musicological analysis has been deemed an approach that is inappropriate for the material (Nanz 2011: 9 f.; Badrutt 2021).

8 Conclusion

In contrast to Bertinetto's postulated "normality" of things that are "all identical or aurally very similar" as stated above (Bertinetto 2012: 121), the two representations considered here (the CD and the video) are not identical at all. Thanks to the act of montage they are as different as they could be, in terms of both their music and their media. We are not dealing with a "frozen" version of the event, but an assemblage – a kind of "composed" improvisation. One could describe them as a composed, compromised form of improvisation, though of two very different types. The CD is a documented form of the sonic result – it presents improvisation as *sound* that by means of montage and post-production techniques has been transformed into an artwork *sui generis*, as an

abbreviated snapshot of 30 evenings – very different from the audio documentation of the iconic "Cologne Concert" of Keith Jarrett, whose ebb and flow were reproduced relatively faithfully. The CD here is, thus, an artifact with work status and an object worthy of aesthetic and critical reception (cf., e.g., Bertinetto 2012: 112). In the case of the video production, however, we are dealing with both a selection that reflects the sonic (and visual) result, and that also documents that result with far more radical editing (and in far shorter sequences than on the CD). But at the same time, the close-up, flexible hand camera also documents excerpts of the process of the improvisation, which is emphasized all the more by the additional statements made on the video by the participants. The director Liechti himself realized through his recordings that only the film could reflect the process and the product adequately, precisely because it tells its own story and because its use of editing and concentration means it can penetrate to the core of the improvisation:

> Their sets are largely improvised, and it is part of the essence of improvised music that it sometimes "sags"; for longer periods it simply hangs there, looking for something, in order, ultimately, to find results that are all the richer for it. The cinematic montage lets us shorten the long, sometimes strenuous path taken by the improvising musicians to reach their flights of fancy, and – without excluding the creative struggle – it enables us to concentrate it all in a musical route that allows us up-close insights into the interior life of this music. Only the means of film allow us to convey the exciting vigor and sensuality of a LIVE concert to an audience that is itself unable to be there physically.
>
> *(Liechti 2006)*

Notes

1 P. Liechti, *Hardcore Chambermusic – A Club For 30 Day*s, 2006 (Intakt DVD 131). The quotations are in Swiss-German dialect in the original. HK = Hans Koch, MS = Martin Schütz and FS = Fredy Studer. We quote here from the English subtitles, with occasional edits where necessary. Excerpts can be found on YouTube at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8qCbdczbqno (accessed July 29, 2019). All the quotations in text, marked with a timeframe, refer to this work.
2 Koch-Schütz-Studer, *Tales From 30 Unintentional Nights*, 2006 (CD Intakt Records 117).
3 Audio: we find excerpts from evenings 10/11 and 21 edited together, then 25, edited down in increasingly concentrated form (on two tracks): 26 and 28 ff.
4 Other authors have also pointed out the not every element of a musical improvisation is created *ad hoc* or "ex nihilo"; cf. Alperson 1984: 21 f.; Brown 1996.
5 Ruta 2017: 516.
6 Liechti 2006.

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28

THE RISK OF IMPROVISED MUSIC

An Ethnographic Approach

Tom Arthurs

1 Introduction

Whether jazz-fact or jazz-fiction, while planning this chapter, the story of a well-known London-based jazz and blues guitarist quickly sprang to mind – a musician who notoriously organized a field-trip of "free" improvisers to a motorcycle speedway race.[1]

While at first glance the connection between motorsport and Improvised Music may not be altogether obvious, the tenacious protagonist nonetheless used the occasion to underscore and relativize both parties' notions and conceptions of risk: contrasting the riders' breakneck flirtation with death to the improvisers' fear of potential humiliation in front of an audience, and the general perception of musical improvisation as an inherently risky activity.

As far as I know, no-one has lost their life directly in the pursuit of Improvised Music-making, but the story nonetheless suggests various important questions. What might the two activities have in common? What are the risks involved in musical improvisation, and Improvised Music, in particular? And, in a field of artistic activity that still often conjures up images of divine inspiration, ideas arriving "out of the blue," and the enduring misconception that performance takes place without reference to any prior preparation or experience (Blum 1998; Arthurs 2015) – is the activity of Improvised Music-making (and other connected art forms) really as risky as its popular perception might suggest?

Can we be more specific and scientific about this supposedly most mystical of activities? Can we create a precise definition of "risk" in the context of Improvised Music-making? What might it mean to "fail" or to "succeed," and what is at stake? Can we talk concretely about how musicians might negotiate the perils of such a field?

Fortunately, a range of key texts in improvisation studies and connected disciplines have already long put paid to the idea that musical improvisation is any such aleatoric, random, or magical act (in this way at least), and it is now generally accepted among academics and musicians that most (if not all) improvised activities rely on more-or-less complex networks of prior experiences; cultural conventions, assumptions and agreements; musical materials and structures that have been developed and practiced in advance; and agreements constructed by particular working groups and long-term musical relationships (Nettl 1974; Marr and Bailey 1992; Arthurs 2015; Berkowitz 2010; Blum 1998; Chan 1998; Manuel 1998; Nettl and Russell 1998; Slawek 1998; Small 1998; Pressing 2000; Kinderman 2009; Levin 2009; Rasmussen 2009; Solis and Nettl 2009; Berkowitz 2010; Arthurs 2015 Manuel 1998; Marr and Bailey 1992; Nettl 1974; Nettl and Russell 1998; Pressing 2000; Rasmussen 2009; Slawek 1998; Small 1998; Solis and Nettl 2009).

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On a more macro-level, the sociologists Becker and Bourdieu propose that each music scene (artworld or field of artistic production) is constructed around a set of shared conventions (values, experiences, knowledge), and that these agreements serve to connect its members and create what might then be recognised by those participants as Art (Bourdieu 1984, 1993; Becker 2008).

From this point of view, the Improvised Music scene is certainly no different to any other field of artistic activity, even if its conventions are not always clearly evident to a lay audience (or, as Becker might put it, to the otherwise well-socialised member of society). To use the terms of Bourdieu then, the field of Improvised Music-making requires a specific cultural competence for its interpretation and appreciation; therefore, why should it not also require a specific definition and understanding of risk?

From this starting point, my ethnographic research on the Improvised Music community of Berlin during 2012 and 2013 uses grounded theory (interviews with thirty-four musicians and experts selected by social network analysis) and participant observation (around seventy concerts) to examine the aesthetics, ideologies and practicalities of one sub-world of contemporary European Improvised Music-making.[2]

This chapter unites some of these findings to explore the idea of genre-specific risk in Improvised Music-making – evaluating it on its own terms, exploring the variables on which it depends, and examining the strategies by which it is mediated.

2 Defining Risk: Two Axes of Appreciation in Improvised Music-making

2.1 Musical/Sounding Outcomes

One key finding of my research in Berlin was the proposition that any analysis of Improvised Music-making (at least in the terms of its audience and participants) should distinguish between two levels of appreciation: the "musical," "sounding," "aesthetic" outcome of a performance, and the interaction and process that generated it.

"Good" musical outcomes were often discussed in terms of sounding and aesthetic outcomes so clear, well-structured and united that "every note fits – it could have been written out," where "everyone actually finds their absolute place in the thing," or, as drummer Yorgos Dimitriadis put it:

> You have your place, your space, what you're supposed to do [and] so does everybody else… It's like rock… [when] everything clicks together, and when it all clicks, it rolls. [This] happens also with our music. […] It stays in a groove… this music makes me dance, [and] with this glue, and this locking together, the whole thing *happens*.

Such positive musical/sounding outcomes were generally defined by the convergence of homogenous aesthetic tastes and aims or convergences of timing,[3] and this occurred on the micro-level (choice of materials, density of ideas, speed of events) and the macro (architecture, global pacing, evolution of global structure, density).

Accordingly, musical/sounding outcomes that were considered "good" were expressed in terms of genre-specific conventions of the music "happening," "working," "locking-in" or "grooving," and the precise criteria for these terms were generally known and passed on only intuitively and wordlessly (learning by doing) between the scene's expert listeners and musicians.

2.2 Process and Interaction

Aside from the musical/sounding level of appreciation already discussed, Improvised Music performances were also often assessed by expert listeners and musicians in terms of the underlying processes and interaction of the participants.

Most practitioners and listeners agreed that it was relatively rare that the musical/sounding level would "work" consistently over the course of an entire performance and, accordingly, most Improvised Music concerts included various degrees of "searching" – where the musical result was far from "happening," "grooving" or "locking-in," and the aesthetic outcome was far from homogenous. In such cases, differing intentions clashed, opposing voices competed to show the way forward and, sometimes, nobody would take the lead at all.

As vibraphone player Els Vandeweyer put it, "sometimes there's these really searching periods in the music where there's nothing much happening," and in the words of saxophonist Anna Kaluza:

> Maybe there are amazing things happening at some point, but then there will be very strange moments too – it can't be avoided, and it shouldn't be.

Compared to other more conventional music styles, appreciation of the role of searching periods appears quite unique to Improvised Music performance practice, and, in the opinion of many participants in my fieldwork, this was still one of the most difficult elements for non-expert listeners to grasp – the axis of musical/sounding appreciation lending itself somewhat more willingly to the traditional tools of music analysis.

From this point of view, the performance of (pre-)composed music is obviously much less "risky" – searching playing almost no role in the final recording or concert, and any traces of doubt and insecurity caused by such experimentation having been long erased from the final product. Indeed, much experiment and trial-and-error in this sense (dare we call this improvisation?) has usually already taken place in the process leading up to performance (whether during composition or rehearsal), and by the time an audience encounters such "finished" works (whether it be Mozart or M.I.A.), these processes are usually no longer evident in the concert, score, mp3 or video, which, in turn, becomes the central text for discourse and analysis (Cage 1969: 35).

As an inevitability of the creation of Improvised Music however, which is undertaken by multiple authors in real-time and where much of the collective process unfolds before the eyes and ears of the audience,[4] such searching moments were deemed inevitable, and, for many Improvised Music practitioners, these moments in themselves became a focal point for a particular kind of discussion and enjoyment.

This, in turn, inspired a range of differing tastes and practices for musicians, who situated themselves between the following two poles:

- Musicians who avoided searching, quickly seeking homogenous musical/sounding outcomes in order not to risk that the music is not "happening," "grooving," or "locking-in" (or that a mutually enjoyable aesthetic experience was not attained).
- Musicians who provoked, encouraged and embraced long periods of searching: in the hope that this would be rewarded by the emergence of moments of particular novelty or beauty. Such "special moments" were generally considered impossible without such risk-taking or by reverting to short-term solutions.

The first position outlined here is probably fairly self-explanatory, and is one that is easy to recognise for any music-lover searching for aesthetic perfection in the sense of more conventional composed music.

To the lay audience, however, the second school of thought – where searching was embraced, encouraged and actively explored – might require somewhat more explanation. Simply put, why should an audience pay to watch and listen to a band searching for, and not necessarily reaching, a "good"-sounding conclusion?

By means of explanation, bassist Antonio Borghini (very much a fan of such processes) told the following story, recalling a first-meeting of cellist Tristan Honsinger and vocalist Phil Minton:

> [They'd] been wandering around into nothingness for 25 minutes or something… [and] even myself, I was saying, "What the fuck is going on, come on, I mean you both have all the tools to get out of that… Come on! Do something!" […]
>
> And surely enough, the flower blossomed after 30 minutes, and probably [was] something that wouldn't have happened if they started doing their own tricks and were safe. […] That was really enlightening.

For such connoisseurs, searching was often just as enjoyable as the result, and bassist, archivist, historian and "expert listener" Klaus Kürvers made a direct comparison to literature ("the crime novel is only about searching"), while trumpeter Axel Dörner described how

> In the moment it feels very uncomfortable… where there's different levels of timing, or somebody's somewhere else in the musical structure. But then it's very interesting suddenly, the way it turns. […]
>
> That's part of it. Sometimes, if it doesn't work, it doesn't mean it's uninteresting music. It's maybe more interesting when you listen back to it. […] I had this experience a couple of times where I'd play a concert, and the more uncomfortable part seems to be more interesting, [and] seems to have been more interesting for the audience.

Genre-specific perceptions of "honesty" and authenticity played a considerable part in this appreciation and, in many cases, these qualities and the interactional/processual axis of musical appreciation were deemed more important than the realisation of a "beautiful," "working" or coherent aesthetic outcome – the perceived integrity of the process, and the equality of the participants, having a higher value than the musical/sounding result.

Drummer Christian Lillinger, for example, praised one of his closest colleagues and collaborators:

> [This musician], he's incredible. He's always doing something different – he's searching, like a child. He searches, and for me it's totally fine if a concert is shit, because [he always takes] the risk to do something new. And sometimes, OK, it didn't work – but so what? He tried something. And that's really [this guy]. And it's great. And when it goes well, then it goes really well. That's what it's about.

Electronic musician Valerio Tricoli described one concert where "a recording of that gig is not even music I think! It's not even fucking music," and one expert listener explained how, in such cases:

> It's like a character movie they show. It's not only the music. The music is only the surface. [There are] lots of things showing underneath.

Another participant added that:

> For me it's an issue of if I have to reconstruct [a performance] in terms of the music… or just in terms of the performance. If I just have to say, "OK, it was just a performance with some music put into it. But the important thing was the performance." Or… if I have to say… "It was… musical improvisation with a strong performative element, in which the musical part failed."

Based on findings from my interviews then, such distinctions appear somewhat pertinent when considering ideas of risk in Improvised Music-making – on one hand, the risk that the music and musicians would not "lock together," "find their place" or "groove" within a homogenous musical/sounding result, but also the risk that long periods of searching would (or would not) result in the unique and amazing moments that otherwise legitimised the pursuit.

Already, then, two quite differing perceptions of risk-management in Improvised Music practice become apparent:

- Where the aim was the fast and efficient realisation of a homogenous, harmonious, concrete musical/sounding result – the risk being that this wouldn't happen;
- Where the aim was to create novel and "amazing" moments following searching and experimentation, and where the risk was that the uncertainty and vagueness of that searching would not be legitimised in an "amazing" and novel "working" outcome – despite the preservation of "honesty," integrity and the novelty of interaction.

3 Mediating Risk: Tastes and Strategies

Within this framework of musical/sounding vs. interactional/processual appreciation, four main approaches emerged in response to the questions, challenges and risks already discussed.

These were referred to by participants as:

1 "Real Improvising"
2 "Tricks" and Conscious Interventions
3 Pre-Planned Rules and Concepts
4 Composition

These distinctions served to create social allegiances within Berlin's Improvised Music scene, and performers often expressed clear tastes in their membership of one or more of these groups. Some musicians remained loyal to one approach or ideology, whereas others were more flexible, or selected different approaches depending on the context.

3.1 "Real Improvising"

For so-called "real improvisers," the main aim was to reach and maintain a state of flow, distinguishing their "real" or "pure" approach to improvisation from more "cerebral," or "conceptual" practices.

In terms of quickly reaching musical/sounding outcomes, "real improvising" was the riskiest tactic, and prioritised the attainment of the flow state, the process of interaction and the integrity of the performers' intentions, interactions, authenticity and "honesty," over the fast realisation of a homogenous aesthetic result.

As a result, searching was welcomed and encouraged, and for purists and defenders of this way of playing, such as Antonio Borghini, the use of any pre-planned concepts or conscious strategies directly opposed his/her perceived freedom of expression:

> ["Real improvisation"] touches the very core of the process for me, which is… the freedom to [make] your own associations with things. […] For me [it] would be very hard to know that I *can't* do things when I improvise.
>
> I think it's very dangerous to push a player into a line… [and] that's the risk of conceptual improvising. [Sometimes people say] "OK, let's play just pianissimo," and for me this is shit.

> I mean, OK, but I would rather have you playing that strong that you'll *make* me play pianissimo… As far as Improvised Music is concerned, that's my point.

As Borghini intimated, for many musicians concerned with "real improvising," all the instructions for music-making existed in performance itself (with no need for prior discussion or arrangement), and these instructions took the form of a series of mutually understood cues and signs. These signs were used by performers in real-time and as part of the flow process, and each musician listened for and responded to these, in order to construct a collectively composed piece.

Biliana Voutchkova explained how, in the moment:

> The way that I always play, I allow things to appear. I don't make necessarily decisions [sic]… and the decisions are more like "matter-of-fact." You come to this point when, "This is the thing to do," and it's not really coming of "OK, now I will do this," but it's coming of, "This is where we're going now, and this is where we are, and there is only that that I can do."
>
> There is not so much freedom in the sense that, "Ah, I can do anything." No, no. It's like a very particular thing. And this comes from this sensitivity that you build… and the people around you. Things appear somehow, and they go a certain direction and then you learn to follow this, so it's somewhat again dealing with the unknown, but at the same time you recognize certain directions.

She continued:

> I'm not thinking… [and] it's the wrong term for this work. There is no thinking happening. Or maybe we call it intuitive thinking or something. […] It's somehow connected to the body, and is connected to the experience and… to responding to some things that are already happening. So it's more a responsive thinking, if you want to call it [that]. Or intuitive responsive thinking, then, rather than – "The composition has to go this direction because…" […] It's not coming this way.

Many musicians described "real improvising" as "instinctive" or "subconscious," and – returning to our motorcycle racers – improvisers' descriptions correspond well to Csikszentmihalyi's portrayal of flow states attained by experts in a wide range of "risky" fields (Csikszentmihalyi 2014).

Taking the analogy further, one expert listener went so far to compare Improvised Music practice with the mastery of martial arts, describing how:

> I think that's one of the principles of the whole thing… you learn, you learn, you learn the technique, but to master the technique you have to forget what you learn. And I think at least for my perception, it's [about] the people who forgot… what they learned, and simply do – like you drive a car – you don't think about driving a car. […] The technique is no question, the thing is no question… it grows out of itself.

Remembering Pressing's work on the psychology of improvisation (Pressing 1984, 2000), it is quite conceivable that expert improvisers have trained themselves to make lightning-quick "subconscious" evaluations of their surroundings and act accordingly – this decision-making relying on the execution of a learnt repertoire of cognitive assemblies that run on a level too fast to perceive consciously. Such assemblies use feedback and feedforward to predict outcomes, and make use of previously learnt and practiced materials (motor memory), experiences with the same musicians (and others), short- and long-term memory during a given performance and other accumulated conventions, cultural knowledge, concepts and ideologies.[5] Of course a full study of

these connections is far beyond the scope of this chapter, but hopefully these questions might be addressed elsewhere, with time.

3.2 "Tricks" and Conscious Interventions

Although many musicians described some (or all) of their musical practices as "real" or "pure" improvisation, others consciously exited the flow state, deciding to send strong signals to their colleagues, in order to change the direction of the music from what would have "automatically" happened had they not intervened.

Guitarist Olaf Rupp compared this to building and maintaining a camp fire:

> When I play [it's] a thermic process that creates its own energy by burning itself. [But] sometimes, like on the fire, you have to arrange it… you put some wood, you put it in. […] I influence it. […] I enjoy this game between the freedom and my influence on it.

Talking quite concretely about the need to reach clearer musical/sounding outcomes more quickly than with "real improvising" (and therefore deliberately curtailing searching moments), saxophonist and clarinet player Tobias Delius described how:

> I try to come there thinking of it a bit like a blank page – "OK, let's see what happens." But I don't think it's only about that. It's also about making conscious decisions about starting and stopping or trying something else or not. […] It's important also to… think, and to make strategies as you're playing.
>
> [Sometimes] I feel or hear that the music needs just… for a completely new voice to be added, which may, or may not, have anything to do with what's going on already. Like another layer, which then, by default somehow, will become part of the whole afterwards.
>
> Let's say we're all… making a nice muddy rumble in the lower register, and that's going on, and we're all happy, we're enjoying it, or we're assuming we're enjoying it! [laughs] And then, suddenly, let's see what happens if I do something completely different. […] "Ok – let's see what happens if I whistle a melody through my instrument now." Those kind of things, as if you might be reading a book and somebody just, [whoosh], flips a few pages – that can of course happen naturally, without any kind of pre-meditation, but sometimes it's also just like "OK." [Or] of course, also just stopping – just to stop playing, or just in a very quiet piece, saying, "Look, why don't I just play a very loud event now suddenly," or something like that.

For Rupp, conscious interventions also served to create aesthetic stability in the group or sculpted macro-level architectural decisions, in the sense that

> In some situations, it's really important to really consciously lock yourself to avoid making contact with the others. I think there are situations where this is important, because you thought to establish some roots where the tree can grow.
>
> Very often I'm thinking about developments, and [I] try to anticipate dead spots – so I don't follow him to this, because I know it's better if I have something else going on when he meets his dead spot, or changes. And this is all guessing… it's all a game – because then [maybe] he doesn't go to that spot… [maybe] there is no dead spot when he plays!

Such conscious interventions were often referred to by participants as "tricks," and in addition to changes in musical material, these also included the use of physical movement (changing position

on stage), spoken text (mainly also improvised) or visual imagery (one musician told me how he would decide to imagine himself suddenly in a dentist's waiting room).

A change of interactional strategy was another "trick" used by such musicians, and inside-piano and electronics player Andrea Neumann would sometimes pause her flow mid-performance to ask:

> Do you react fast, do you never react, do you try to ignore the other one, or do you want to sound parallel, or do you want to sound completely together?

Bass clarinettist Rudi Mahall took into consideration that:

> I hear the notes that they play, and I can say which notes they are, and then I can decide "Ah, he's playing an A now, what am I going to play over this A? Or should I also play the melody that he's playing?" […] [Or maybe] I just repeat what I did five minutes ago… or maybe I'll play what one of the others was playing one minute ago, and simply play that. [Alternatively] if the others are playing loud then I might just start playing so quietly that nobody can hear me anymore.

In addition to purely musical concerns, for some musicians tricks and conscious interjections were part of a professionalism aimed at quickly attaining "good" musical/sounding outcomes in high-pressure concert situations, and one bassist described how

> If I don't like how something's going, then I feel pressure – it's a difference between a festival gig and a normal bar gig. […] You can go "This has got to get good," and "Fuck, this isn't happening!" and so "I've got to make this happen."

This, however, was not an opinion shared by all – and many "real" improvisers considered this attitude to be against the ethics of "pure" improvisation in general, and too great a compromise in terms of the authenticity, "honesty" and artistic freedom that they sought to represent.

3.3 Pre-planned Rules and Concepts

Limiting the risk of non-working aesthetic outcomes, and reducing the potential for searching even further, were musicians who used pre-planned rules and concepts as a basis for improvisation – agreeing on common aims, processes and strategies before performance, and not deviating from them during its course.

Such decisions greatly increased the chance for immediate homogenous musical/sounding outcomes, and encouraged the emergence of specific musical textures, sound choices, harmonic fields, densities and counterpoints, which participants felt could not be achieved through "real improvising" alone.

Many felt that using pre-planned rules and concepts helped them further avoid the kind of "subconscious" habits, "licks" and clichés that often surfaced whilst "real improvising," and strategies ranged from the simple use of stopwatches or egg-timers to limit the length of certain sections of improvisation (and therefore force change), to the use of simple-yet-clear verbal instructions. Clarinetist Michael Thieke described how, in the group *The Pitch*:

> What we fix is the [tonal] material, so we have these pitch sets, which are usually four notes, and… we go from this pitch set to the other and there might be overlapping periods between the two, but it's the idea to keep them really separate. […]

> These pitch sets are actually transposed structures. So one of them, transposition zero would be C, C#, E, and F#… then this structure, [is transposed by a] minor 2nd, or minor 3rd… transposed [through] every 12 notes, and then there's the inversion, and that's the only material we use. […]
>
> Going back from transposition zero to inversion 10 [for example]… that's the piece. […] So that these fields seem to move slowly from one set to another. […] You can [improvise] within these changes… stay on one note, or… go [with] the changing colors.
>
> Or the other thing that we fix, usually, is the way we use [the pitch sets], so we… name them like "frozen"… or "liquid," to have a certain type of movement or space. "Frozen" is… very, very slowed down. Almost like drone music but not with the idea to do a drone, but at least a very slowed down melody, that is basically long tones. And this "liquid" would be more like [the composer Morton] Feldman… not the way he repeats, but more these little phrases that have like a melodic phrase character.

It might easily be said that such detailed instructions left relatively restricted scope for the individual freedom and searching valued by "real improvisers," however, for musicians active in this area, the specific, immediate and concrete musical/sounding outcomes that emerged were considered well worth the sacrifice.

For such musicians, it was mostly unimportant whether or not their work was still termed "improvisation" (bringing to mind Blum's suggestion that performance practice should be evaluated on a spectrum from *more* to *less* improvised), and, for many, such restrictions opened the doors to other more novel, unique and unexpected forms of music-making – encouraging them to question habits, seek freedom in less familiar places and move beyond the "automation" of the flow state.

As Australian bassist Clayton Thomas explained:

> It doesn't matter to me, necessarily whether I'm improvising or not… because actually [the group] *The Ames Room* doesn't improvise, we play a process. But the process frees us up from our own tricks, and so maybe I'm improvising *more* because I'm… less aware of what's going to happen. […]
>
> I'm going to put you on another planet and see how free you are [there], as opposed to, "You're free to do whatever you want," on the same planet all the time.

While some groups like *The Pitch* and *The Ames Room* performed processes in concert and recording situations, for others, rules and concepts were only for use in rehearsals or when working together for the first time – forging connections and developing group-specific "language" or conventions, which culminated in the individual aesthetic and interactional identity of each group.

Aside from small group situations, however, rules and concepts were often introduced to create aesthetic focus and clarity in groups of eight musicians or more, where the rapid arrival of homogenous and "good" musical/sounding outcomes through "real improvising" was deemed highly unlikely, mainly due to an unmanageable number of conflicting wishes and aesthetic aims.

In 2012–13, two main improvising orchestras played regularly in Berlin, and both the *Splitter Orchester* (members of the Echtzeit/[post-]reductionist community) and the *Berlin Improvisers Orchestra* (*Ber.I.O.*, musicians more connected with jazz and free jazz) had upwards of twenty members each.[6]

Despite their aesthetic differences, participants in both ensembles agreed that in larger groups:

> Bad things can happen then when it's completely free. […] People just play because they don't want not to play – they think they *have* to play.

And Anna Kaluza, one of the key organisers of *Ber.I.O.*, added that:

> I don't think it sounds so satisfying [when people improvise freely in a large group context] – it's just too messy. We just don't do it well enough I think, the really free improv. I think it can be learnt, but… people really *want* to play, and it's just almost like 20 people just practicing for themselves sometimes.

Splitter Orchester often attempted to resolve these challenges with pre-decided rules and concepts (even though in many concerts they would choose not to use them), and Biliana Voutchkova described how:

> We do a lot of exercises and a lot of work [in] pre-concert times, in order really to find each other. […] When you're in a smaller group… you don't really need so much preparation… but with Splitter it's needed because we all do this small work on a smaller scale, but when we all come together it's bringing all these other little worlds together and they really need to find each other. […] [Rules and concepts] just make it better, and to make it fresh and to have more possibilities again, that we don't get trapped into doing the same.

Andrea Neumann explained a rule from *Splitter*'s tubist Robin Hayward where "you have an idea to play something, but that you play it thirty seconds later," and also commented that such rules were not necessarily as restrictive as they might at first appear:

> When you have a good rule you can act very free in it. For example there is a rule… it sounds so simple, but it's so effective, when one person changes [material], then everybody has to change in the structure. But it doesn't mean how many people are involved – you don't have to play, [and] sometimes just two people can play. [A lot of different things can happen] inside this, with all the improvised skills.

Adopting a different approach, *Ber.I.O.* focused less on preparation and more on the moment of performance, developing an ever-evolving collection of hand signs that were known to all members of the orchestra. These signals could be used to define specific textures, dynamics, choices of musical material, rhythmic features and orchestration, and also cued various unison gestures, starts and stops.

Musicians received these "conductions" in real time from one or more conductors (who were also improvising with these signs)[7] and, showing how such decision-making could lead directly to concrete musical/sounding results, Anna Kaluza described how:

> [One musician] introduced a new sign, [whereby] his arm moved like a clock. And with his fingers he indicated how many either long or short notes we were allowed to play during the clock going round. So sometimes it was only one or two… [and] it was great because there was nothing happening – only "prrrp" [quietly]… [pauses, silence]… "prrrp" [quietly again]. And that's very rare. It would never ever happen without this [conduction].

Like Neumann and Thomas, Kaluza was careful to add that her aim was not to restrict the freedom of the orchestra's members, and that, despite the election of a conductor or conductors, equality and a flat hierarchy should remain intact among the players:

> We all know that if we don't feel well with someone conducting us, or don't like a situation, then we can always rebel… [and] if you think, "Well no, the music seems to want this or

> that," then do it! It's OK. We're all still responsible for it. […] And then… usually afterwards, the conductors say, "Yeah, great, it was good when you just joined in without me."

Members of *Splitter Orchester* and Ber.I.O. generally agreed that after much common work on rules, concepts and conduction, good "real improvising" should be a possibility in large group scenarios, but only after several weeks of consecutive rehearsal and reflection, during which time the urge "just to play" should be sufficiently tamed, and mutual understanding and a set of conventions for interaction and the management of aesthetic aims should emerge.

3.4 Composition

Finally in this chapter, and even further reducing the risk of non-working musical/sounding outcomes not occurring, many improvising musicians employed composed or pre-planned materials or concepts in their performances.

Through the use of composed materials, pre-decided aesthetic outcomes or processual/interactional frameworks suggested or defined certain directions for improvisation before a single note was even played. While this substantially limited the options for in-the-moment improvisation, the specific musical/sounding outcomes produced were generally deemed worthy of this loss of "honesty," authenticity and freedom (in the sense of "real improvisation").

Just as with the pre-planned rules and concepts detailed in the previous section, musicians evaluated which elements benefitted from being fixed in advanced ("composed") or decided in the moment ("improvised"), however, here, compositional materials were more substantial and clearly defined, and the ratio of pre-planning to in-the-moment freedom was noticeably more skewed towards the former.

The use of compositional materials varied between jazz- and Echtzeitmusik-related improvising activities, and these differences will be explored below.

4 Jazz and (Post-) Free Jazz Related Composition

For many musicians with a background in jazz, compositions were now not just merely vehicles improvising "over" (like the swing feel or harmonic chord changes of traditional/modern jazz), but were used to look "for atmospheres and moods that make good starting points for improvisation," or for "arriving somewhere, or finding a quick consensus in the band."

Compositions were used to provide moments of focus and consensus in otherwise "manic" improvising, and pieces were generally not meant to be treated with the reverence assigned to "the work" in classical music. Short compositional "pillars" were often written with certain players in mind, and musicians were encouraged to interpret these pieces with their own sound and personality, as well as potentially being instructed to "destroy and slash-and-burn everything."

In many cases, compositions could be invoked during an otherwise improvised performance (without planning or a pre-decided set-list), and as drummer Steve Heather explained, when he played in the trio *Booklet*:

> We also have all of these songs that we've worked on, from all over the place, but the idea is just we go on stage and just play. […] If someone brings one in, you can join it, or you can counterpoint it. And in a way, aesthetically for us, the less slick it is the better, because we don't want to be clever. It's not about being clever, it's about being musical. […]
>
> It's exciting to hear… if [the others are] bringing in something… [and] you choose how you want to never-get-your-way-to-where-you-wanna-be in that song.

In this case, the compositions could be performed differently each time, and Heather's bandmate Tobias Delius added that:

> [With] the method we use… we don't know exactly when they're going to come in, or if they're going to come in. […] It's not like we say, "This tune, we're just going to play nice and sweet," we don't make that decision.

It was hoped by many that compositional elements might help bridge the gap between non-expert listeners and more abstract forms of improvisation (*Booklet*'s repertoire included songs by Duke Ellington and Jimi Hendrix, as well as original compositions), and others also saw this as an opportunity to get gigs and recognition in the wider international jazz scene.

5 Echtzeit Composition

Aside from improvising musicians working in more jazz-related areas, musicians of the Echtzeit-scene also used compositional or pre-planned elements in their work.

This was especially common in solo concerts, and bassist Mike Majkowski described how when he played solo:

> Every time I play a solo concert I always have some kind of a game plan, but the way I follow the plan always changes. Or how loose I am with the plan is different from concert to concert. Or [if] I'm able to leave open periods of… chaotic activity and then see where it goes.

In one performance:

> The whole piece only had three pitches. I knew that I would begin with pizzicato D, followed by high D harmonic with the bow, and a lower C# harmonic with the bow, and that was the first cell that I would repeat. And then, over time I would drop the C#, and then just continue with the D pizz[icato], and D bow, and that that would last for 10 minutes. That was the first section. [The] second section would be retaining that high D, but with pizz[icato], and playing an open E string at the same time – "Boom… Boom…" [sings]. You know, so somehow, that thread of the high D remains. And then that would last for 10 minutes. And then the last 10 minutes would be that same D and E, but introducing the C# harmonic again. So that was a pretty clear, strict, straight kind of thing.

In such cases, strict limitations could lead to extremely concentrated performances, and Andrea Neumann described how such decisions could shift her focus onto different areas of the music, thereby allowing her to find more improvisational freedom and sensitivity in new terms:

> Since almost more than one year, when I have a solo… I play… a sort of composition that works with movement… that's very set.
>
> The skills of an improviser are in it, because how you work with [electronic] feedbacks, [and] there are quite a lot of decisions you have to make, even when the material's quite clear. How long you have one sound, when the next is starting, if you do it then again, or if you start with another one. […] I [also] have to listen very, very carefully first to produce [the feedback], and also to know then what I want next.

Somewhat predictably, such pre-planning was deemed undesirable by devout "real improvisers" (although some musicians operated in both domains), and in order to distinguish themselves from

"real" purists and to put a name to their practices as "performer-composers," such composers came to describe their work as "Echtzeit Composition."

This body of work exhibited a fascinating range of improvisational practices within partially composed/pre-planned frameworks, and, for percussionist Burkhard Beins, this allowed him to carefully curate known and unknown elements of his work and to compose processes and freedoms specific to each piece, performer, or performance:

> For me, improvisation means appreciating and welcoming the unknown and unforeseeable, in contrast to an attempt to achieving something one already thinks he knows, or one has thoroughly thought out beforehand. In that sense, all areas I'm working in involve improvisation to a certain degree, but usually it's a combination of both [improvisation and composition].
>
> Nowadays I would want to use the term "Improvised Music" exclusively for a musical praxis, which is predominately in favor of ad-hoc meetings and all the challenges coming with it, which can be great. [However,] hopefully as a result of this process of theoretical differentiation currently flourishing within our circuits, "Improvised Music" [...] can become a term distinct from another term for a different musical praxis of long-term groups using a combination of improvisational and compositional elements – maybe something like "Echtzeit composition." Subsuming it all under "Improvisation" seems too unspecific to me.

Aside from solo work, Echtzeit Compositions were often developed collectively, and groups worked together using improvisation, recording and reflection to create musical structures that were fixed to greater or lesser degrees, and performed repeatedly. Written scores (if there were any) were not necessarily legible to other musicians, and were intended mainly as an aide-memoire for the performer-composers themselves (and not as a means for other musicians to recreate their work).

Michael Thieke and Kai Fagashinski's clarinet duo *The International Nothing* had scores that were (quite deliberately) incomprehensible to anyone other than themselves, and the duo evolved a unique notation system specific to their needs – using diagrams of unconventional fingerings (for multiphonics), verbal instructions, durations and graphic elements.

Describing by far the least "improvised" example of performance practice discussed until now, Thieke explained:

> For 4 years, or 3 years, we worked on this stuff, really intensely… [and] it took us a long time always to write these pieces, [and] to record them. The pieces got a lot more detailed by playing them, so when we first recorded them, we'd never played them live, so then the first record came out and only after [that] did we start to play live. And then by playing concerts, those pieces got actually a lot better, but also the pieces then we wrote got a lot more detailed. […] We had these general topics, which was like a search for "beatings,"[8] [but] now there's a lot of little variations on these things.

Biliana Voutchkova compared this process to her work in the dance world:

> [This] is also a way that dancers work a lot more than musicians, I think. And I think this way is really… the way to go, even purely musically. […] You find material just improvising… you somehow shape it in some way, and it could become a piece. […]
>
> You're researching, and you don't know yet what you have. And in order to find it, you have to talk about it. […] You say, "OK, this is what happened in this moment when I was next to the wall, this is what I felt, this is how it felt." Then you write it down. [You] look at it, and then you collect all this information and then a certain clarity appears. Then it becomes really clear that it's working, or it's not.

Thieke concluded that, in the end, his process was not so different to conventional (musical) composition methods, but did point out that, in the case of *The International Nothing*, there were now two authors instead of one, and the creative steps leading to the work's completion were executed in a somewhat different order:

> I think also in composition there's a lot more improvisation than people would like to admit – even those ones who have really strict systems of composing. […] The improvisation happens during the composing process [but] instead, improvisers compose in the moment, but still with some material that is pre-conceived. I think that's very close to each other, [and] it's just the meaning of time or maybe the function of time in the process is different. […] Certain things happen at a certain different point of the whole process, looking back from the [perspective of the] product, the concert [or] the recording.

6 In Conclusion

This chapter has offered a whirlwind introduction to concepts of risk and risk-management in the world of Improvised Music-making in Berlin during 2012–13.

Separating the musical/sounding and processual/interactional levels of performance allows for two distinct classifications of risk – one defined by the search for fast homogenous "working," aesthetic outcomes, and the other, by the preservation of genre-specific definitions of "honesty," authenticity and intention (explored through "searching" and rewarded, in the best cases, by the emergence of novel and striking aesthetic results).

Musicians defined their musical identities according to their tastes and relationship with these risks, and chose from four main strategies to negotiate the "perils" of different settings and challenges.

These techniques ranged from flow-state "real improvising," "tricks" and conscious interjections and pre-planned rules and concepts, to the use of concrete compositions (which may or may not have emerged through processes involving improvisation).

These strategies affected the risk of good musical/sounding outcomes being reached (and at what speed), whilst having important implications for musicians' adherence to their underlying ideologies, interactional choices and the emergence of novel, concrete or pre-defined aesthetic aims.

Dicing with death, then, maybe it isn't – but the complexity of risk-taking in Improvised Music, as well as the space for individual taste and identity in navigating these choices, shows how different ideologies can exist simultaneously within a field that is generally considered homogenous to the lay listener, and offers important further insight into a range of improvising behaviours beyond.

Notes

1 For the purposes of this article, the term "Improvised Music" refers to the scene of improvisers or improvising musicians belonging to the post-1960s post-jazz tradition of European Improvised Music (emerging from 1960s American Jazz and Free Jazz). This scene encompasses the historically contested designations "Free Improvisation," "Open Improvisation," "Free Improvised Music." and "Non-Idiomatic Improvisation," (Bailey 1993: 83) and contains several sub-scenes and aesthetic distinctions of its own (Arthurs 2015: 100).

2 Since the early 1990s, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, Berlin has been commonly held to be one of the most important worldwide centres for Improvised Music-making (Beins et al. 2011; Arthurs 2015).

3 My research identified eight main sub-styles or sub-genres active in Berlin's Improvised Music scene, each with its own different aesthetic aims and values (Arthurs 2015: 110–6).

4 It is important to remember that many improvisers draw on a repertoire of materials that are prepared to various degrees, and have been practiced and explored in advance. Improvised Music also, in this sense, is perhaps not as risky as most people might otherwise believe. Many musicians only made conscious choices to dive into the unknown, such as trumpeter Axel Dörner, who described how only in certain cases, and as a conscious choice:

> I like the idea of controlled-discontrol. […] Basically I know what's happening if I do certain things, but sometimes I like to play the trumpet a little bit like a synthesizer, where you turn a knob and you don't know what's happening. Or you know roughly what's going on [laughs] and… you have to deal with this.

5 Contrary to popular belief, the majority of the improvisers I interviewed practiced intensively and regularly with both conventional and more unconventional technical and musical materials (Arthurs 2015).
6 See (Arthurs 2015: 100) for definitions of these sub-scenes.
7 This system of "conduction" was inspired by the work of American cornetist Butch Morris, and was used by similar improvising orchestras all over the world (Kaluza and others having first encountered the system whilst visiting the *London Improvisers' Orchestra* some years earlier). Whilst they used cards with written text instead of hand signals, Splitter Orchester used a similar method in their 2015 *Creative Construction Set*™ performance at the Berlin Jazz Festival (at the initiation of their guest, trombonist and academic George Lewis), and saxophonist/composer John Zorn's *Cobra* remains an essential reference in the field of directed large group improvisation.
8 A psychoacoustic effect caused by the interference between two sounds of very slightly differing pitch.

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29
EMPATHY IN IMPROVISATION

Deniz Peters

When two or more humans make music together, that togetherness comes in degrees of interpersonal density and depth. It can range all the way from being thin and shallow, in the sense of being largely empty of interpersonal contact or relevance, to being so rich with interrelation that expressivity and experience become shared – that two or more voices become one without their individual autonomy being lost. In this chapter, I consider this latter kind of togetherness in improvisation, which is arguably the closest (most proximate) and fullest kind one can encounter between musicians. I argue that such togetherness fundamentally requires empathy: mutual empathy between the musicians, and empathy towards the emergent joint music, resulting in the joint experience of an emergent additional, interpersonal entity – a shared voice.

Many accounts of improvisation draw attention to the social dimension of group performance, praising the ethical potential of collective improvisation. Yet the very capacity by which dialogue – ethical interpersonal encounter – is reached (when it is), is often obfuscated by evocations of the broad cliché of "chemistry," or relegated to efficient and respectful territorial negotiations, or plainly ignored in accounts that implicitly take asymmetric relationships for granted (in presuming the roles of soloist and accompaniment may shift yet persist as a duality). What is often side-lined or squarely remains out of view is the immensely rich psychological dimension and potential of improvisation, as it offers itself to those in dialogue. This occurs even where dialogue is centrally considered, as in Bruce Ellis Benson's important *The Improvisation of Musical Dialogue: A Phenomenology of Music* (2003). In "Being Musical with the Other," the closing chapter of the book, Benson's key concept to describe relationality is responsibility, with no mention of empathy; however, a central passage implicitly acknowledges this capability as core to dialogue:

> On the one hand, as composer or performer or listener I open myself to the other when I feel the pull of the other that demands my respect. On the other hand, my openness to the other cannot be simply a complete giving in to the other, for then I am no longer myself and am instead simply absorbed by the other. Thus, a dialogue can only be maintained if there is a pull exerted by both sides.
>
> *(Benson 2003: 170 f.)*

While Benson identifies dialogue as a central issue and value, then, what is meant by "openness to being pulled" remains in dire need of unpacking, and the *personal* nature of the dialogue is curiously muted. It seems clear that both "openness" and "pull" are metaphors that imply references to psychological involvement; however, here as elsewhere in general, the experiential dimension of

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interpersonal phenomena is rarely reflected upon further, or a matter of detailed research. Hence, musical togetherness remains little understood.

My aim in this chapter is to elucidate (mutual) empathy as being a key capacity for dialogical musical encounter, contributing to a better understanding of improvisation in its ethical potential. Empathy is not the only aspect of course, but it is a precondition for responsiveness and responsibility not to go astray, and, thus, for the magically bonded playing that marks profound interpersonal musical encounters. I shall show how empathy, combined with a set of other human capacities, is at work at the detailed level of (variously successful or failing) dialogical musical action within a series of artistic experiments aimed at questioning and deepening an established dialogical relationship. In conclusion I put forward the thesis that opportunities arising from mutual empathy are what primarily gives group improvisation its substantial interhuman potential. I start with a brief introduction to the key concepts involved and some of the central work that has been done on these concepts and our understanding of them.

1 Empathy and Related Concepts in and Beyond Music

While the word "empathy" is ever present in the media and in vernacular conversation, it appears only sporadically in academic writings on music, for example when Andy Hamilton writes that

> improvisation makes the performer alive in the moment; it brings one to a state of alertness, even what Ian Carr in his biography of Keith Jarrett has called the 'state of grace.' This state is enhanced in a group situation of interactive empathy.
>
> *(Hamilton 2000: 183)*

Detailed discussions of the role of empathy in musical perception and musical practice are sparse. Within the aesthetics of music, Jerrold Levinson's (1996) persona theory of musical expression and Roger Scruton's (1997) account of musical understanding refer to empathy in passing as bearing on how one comes to hear personal expression as part of the listening experience; only Kendall Walton (2015) has unpacked the notion and made it a central aspect of his aesthetics (I shall return to his understanding below). Music psychology offers a single edited collection *Music and Empathy* (King and Waddington 2017), the volume combining chapters from music psychology, performance research, and pedagogy. Some of them are remarkable, such as those of Matt Rahaim (2017), Anthony Gritten (2017), Felicity Lawrence (2017), and Caroline Waddington (2017), yet none of these concern improvisation directly. Even the voluminous *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* (Lewisand and Piekut 2016) has merely a few passages that discuss empathy, the most substantial being that of Gary Peters (2016: 449–53), who is sceptical of empathy, presupposing that "empathy desires [an ontological oneness] to be preserved rather than created [by empathy]." (I am in turn sceptical of oneness being ontological, but this point would need elaboration elsewhere; in any case, the "ecstasy experienced when such empathy seems – in those fleeting *moments* – to have been attained" [2016: 453], in what I argue is one of we-ness, of shared emotion, rather than a state of ontological oneness.) Related understandings of interpersonal musical phenomena from ethnomusicology, sociology, phenomenology, and performance research exist, such as entrainment (Clayton 2019), tuning-in (Schütz 1976), responsibility (Benson 2003), responsiveness (Sparti 2016), and perception-action cycle (Linson and Clarke 2017), yet do so without discussing the phenomena in terms of empathy. A excellent account is Georgina Born's, whose concept of microsocialities differentiates between relational art, socially engaged art, and further forms (Born 2017: 39), is aware of four planes of social mediation (2017: 43), allows for a complexity of musical object (Born 2017: 44), and is sceptical of idealisations by Schütz (1976), Small (1998), and Attali (1985) (Born 2017: 45). Born is, thus, looking at the same aesthetic coin

concerning the relationship between collectivity and individuality within the ensemble (e.g., Born 2017: 48) from the side of social aesthetics and in terms of agency and mediation, as opposed to the aesthetics and phenomenology angle I offer here (cf. Peters 2017; 2020a; 2020b).

Outside the musical context, empathy features in Gestalt-psychologist understandings of aesthetic perception. Empathy is really only reflected upon to any sophisticated depth in the philosophy of psychology, such as the philosophy of emotion, and in ethics – yet rarely within the context of art or artistic practices.

But what is empathy? Empathy refers to the basic human capacity of arriving at a *feel* for another's psychological state. We seem to have a knowledge of what another person feels, knowledge of what it is like for them in their current state. Edith Stein, in *The Problem of Empathy* (1989), conceives of empathic perception as *sui generis* (1989: 11): we become aware (*gewahr werden*) of what the other feels, but we can never be entirely sure, and, therefore, need to sustain the process of becoming aware, correcting our knowledge on the way (Stein 1989: 84–7). This is an important early insight into a characteristic of empathic knowledge: it is *uncertain*. Somehow I come to know, or believe I come to know, another person's psychological state, affects, feelings, moods, emotions, attitudes, etc., and this impression can vary in degrees of accuracy and conviction (I can be very sure, I can be almost sure, I can have an inkling, I can always be mistaken). Just as importantly, the knowledge is one of *their* state as it differs from mine. Third, the knowledge comes in the form of an experience (I do not merely have a thought or theory about it, I *feel* a state that is not mine).

The third aspect bears some relation to (emotional) contagion. Contagion names the phenomenon when I come to *be in* a state perceived in another, involuntarily, and holding no active belief about it. I pick up the state (or what appears to be a state) by way of an unwitting, preconscious imitating/resonant response. During this experience, I am not interested in the other person's state as being *theirs*; I am not concerned with them as an individual person, I don't want to know more about their state; rather, I immediately act out of the new, imitated state I am in. I am, thus, not sure whether the person remains in this state, nor do I enter a dialogical setting: the relation remains asymmetric. It is characteristic of contagion that I do not reflect upon the state. As was said, I might not even be conscious of my replication, less even of its accuracy. Instead of checking to see whether what I "caught" was an accurate match, it is my own response I pay attention to immediately.

Martha Nussbaum, in *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of Emotions* (2001), has given a closely related account of empathy. For her, empathy "designates an imaginative reconstruction of another person's experience, whether that experience is happy or sad, pleasant or painful or neutral, and whether the imaginer thinks the other person's situation good, bad, or indifferent" (2001: 302). Further, it "is always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself the sufferer" (2001: 327); and "empathy may be inaccurate" (2001: 328). Note that while Stein speaks of awareness, i.e., some form of recognition, Nussbaum characterises it as an act of reconstruction involving the imagination. (Kendall Walton's rich discussion nevertheless treats empathy more like a single act of introspection and projection [2015: 9 ff.] than a process of approximation and continued perceptive interest, implicitly not accounting for the possibility of error, which is why I refrain from further discussing it in the present context). Nussbaum's definition draws attention to a fourth crucial aspect of empathy: it does not (yet) contain a judgement about the felt state. Nussbaum, thus, decisively distinguishes empathy from compassion, differing from "psychologists and psychoanalysts [who] sometimes use the term 'empathy' to mean some combination of imaginative reconstruction with the judgement that the person is in distress and that this distress is bad" (2001: 302). This distinction is of essential importance as, without it, contagion, empathy, sympathy, and compassion are easily conflated. For instance, even in Michael Slote's remarkable account, empathy, much like contagion, involves "having the feelings of another (involuntarily) aroused in ourselves" (Slote 2010: 15), yet, much like sympathy, it "doesn't involve a felt loss of

identity". This apparent contradiction between taking on and, at the same time, not taking on another's feelings remains uncommented. Phenomenologically, however, one can feel the empathised feeling of another *as* that of *another*, while retaining one's current feeling. Not to account for this would be to miss the real possibility of identificatory *choice*. Without the above distinction, we would be left without a term for the phenomenon in question (the felt awareness of *another* person's feeling). Hence, we might further overlook the fact that empathy might also be part of an *antipathetic* relation: in *schadenfreude* (malicious joy) someone empathises with someone else in order to not only intellectually enjoy but to *savour* that person's misfortune.

In empathy, then, I sense the other's state without taking it on. This was the main difference from contagion: the other's state does not (yet) become mine; I do not recognise it as *my* state, nor do I act out of it as being my state. The state (at first) remains the other's and my interest is turned to and focuses on the quality of the other's state: "Am I getting it right?," "Is it changing?" The sense of the other person's state that I appear to be getting is as important as it is puzzling. It is marked by a paradox: I seem to experience the quality of the state, or what I take to be the quality of that state, without taking the experience to be *my* experience. I experience something that I do not experience. Is this genuinely paradoxical, or is it an antinomy?

In voluntary acts of vivid imagination one can palpably imagine being distressed, or content. These are states I know from myself, and I can bring similar knowledge to what I perceive in empathising with another. This is sometimes called mental simulation and seems to match what Nussbaum calls "imaginative reconstruction." Crucially though, the empathetic act is a *response* to what I perceive, and what I know to be a mere (active) perception of another's *actual* state (and I do not know how accurately my perception matches that actual state). That is, empathy isn't a projection (like simply imagining another person's joy, lust, irritation, mischief, or suffering), but names my capability of assuming a feeling other than my own current one and striving for accuracy in this. Contagion unwittingly shifts one's state, whereas empathy has the structure of a question.

2 Empathy in Improvisation? Experiments in Straining the Shared Voice

With this family of concepts in mind, what are the phenomena at hand during actual improvisation? In Peters (2020a) I looked at a detailed setting of establishing and reached (peak) dialogicity, arguing that, via mutual empathy, a shared emotional narrative was worked out through joint action; here, I will give an account of a series of experiments that explored the stability/borders/dissolution of dialogicity artistically, i.e., in concrete musical practice, by challenging it.

The sessions to which I refer took place within the framework of my artistic research project "Emotional Improvisation"[1] during an artistic research residency by Simon Rose and Katharina Hauke that lasted from 23 January until 10 February 2018. Katharina Hauke is a Berlin based experimental documentary filmmaker, cinematographer, and vocal performer who had been on a research residency earlier within the project in 2016 with the instrument of her invention, the *mikrokontrolleur*, and was well primed to film the artistic research process (rather than music videos). To actively enter the performance situation as a third – experimentally filming – member of the trio was in fact a particular research focus in some of the sessions. Simon Rose is an extraordinary international saxophone improviser and scholarly author from London who has been based in Berlin for a number of years now and is increasingly working in transdisciplinary artistic settings after many decades of solo and small ensemble practice. My first ever musical encounter with Rose in 2016 marked a culminating point in the research project, as we discovered shortly after our very first sessions that we could readily form a compound instrument and a shared voice that would span entire pieces. A selection of recordings of pieces from the first days convinced Leo Feigin to publish them via his label Leo Records (*Edith's Problem*: CD LR 812, 2017). My continuing work with Rose over three more research residencies refined and confirmed my experience

and understanding of what we reached together and how we did it, and I published a chapter on this understanding including a detailed analysis of one of the pieces in *Performance, Subjectivity, and Experimentation*, edited by Catherine Laws (Peters 2020a: 17–32), as well as in German in an edited collection by Arnold Jacobshagen (Peters 2020b). During those few residencies and a couple of performances at artistic research conferences, we felt so curiously assured of our interpersonal sense that we decided to challenge our practice via situational interventions, going to our limits to learn more about what enabled our interpersonal connection in the first place. This idea became one of the central research topics of the 2018 residency, and on four of the days we explored a large number of ways in which to – playfully and radically – interfere with our duo proximity, in a series of experiments.

The main location the experiments took place in was the *esc Medien Kunst Labor* in Graz, a venue of current sound and media art productions, exhibitions and performances in one of the narrow streets of the historic part of Graz. The *esc* offers a single space of about 10 × 22 metres and 3 metres in height, concrete floors, interspersed with a number of columns of varying thickness, and almost entirely surrounded by floor-to-ceiling glass windows. The windows create a semi-public ambience as passers-by on three sides can incidentally glean some of the action inside through the glass, depending on the sunlight outside and their curiosity. Curtains exist to close of the venue entirely from outside views, yet, when drawn aside, the space is filled with enough, largely indirect, daylight to allow for natural light for filming. Simultaneously open and reclusive in varying measure over the course of the day, the half-privacy creates a fascinating open lab environment, in terms of inside-outside visibility and (attenuated) audibility in both directions. The columns are thick as trees, so that even inside the space there is notable visual and auditory obstruction and interference. Next to Rose, Hauke, and myself, Günther Berger (sound recording), Margareth Tumler (notekeeping), and Paula Peters (photos and B-cam) participated in the lab-work at *esc*, mainly documenting and assisting, but also including some explorative microphone handling by Berger. Between and sometimes within two or three lengthy improvisation sessions each day we had group discussions, and on some evenings we reviewed and discussed the recordings of the day (stimulated recall).

The series of experiments spanned about forty pieces and consisted of situational variations to strain, hinder, or make strange our resources of creating improvisational proximity and dialogue. Some of the settings were premeditated, some spontaneous. They included: visual and auditory obstruction (*Curtain* pieces I and II), bodily interventions (*Piano drag*, *Sax under piano*, *Umbilical cord*, *Back-to-back*), acoustic/listening interventions (sax behind my back, sax to column, sax to window), instrumental alterations (sax plus water in *Sax under piano*, reading instead of sax in *Hörspiel*), and mediatisation (*Headphones*). While the spatial and material changes – in contrast to a verbal priming – introduced unusual spaces of improvisatory action, the musicality of the actions remained important throughout, as musical cohesion and the finding of the shared voice in and despite the circumstances was the research interest. I shall now discuss a selection of these improvisations in which we coped differently with different impediments, highlighting various aspects that matter to the present question, beginning with the *Curtain* pieces, then going over to *Sax under piano*, *Hörspiel*, and *Headphones*.

During *Curtain I* (Peters' hands and piano behind the curtain) we are about 10–15 metres apart, located diagonally across the space. The piano is largely behind the curtain, with its body inside a recess framed by the venue's glass facade, so that I have to slide my hands under the curtain to reach the keyboard. Sitting with my back to Rose, I cannot see and can only faintly hear him – any finer detail of inhaling, breathing, nuances of soft playing does not reach me. With my hands covered, Rose, in turn, can only see my back and hears a muffled piano sound starved of resonance and colour. We improvise a set of three pieces, and the literal and perceptive distance introduced shows in the slight asynchronicity during much of our playing right from the beginning. The beginning of a piece is momentous in its extreme concentration, fragility, unpredictability,

and far-reaching consequences: one creates an opening full of potential. To create this opening together – knowing when and how to begin together – is a skill. During earlier research sessions with Paul Stapleton playing his Bonsai Sound Sculpture during a three-day visit in April 2016, Stapleton and I realised that we had a shared sensitivity for joint closure, effortlessly finding coherent (elegant, surprising, striking, seamless, organic, etc.) endings together; the beginnings however often felt clumsy, distracted, awkwardly disconnected, predictably tentative. We then decided to experiment with beginnings, doing a whole series of a cycle of miniatures named "You begin," "I begin," "We begin," with pieces (gestures, actually) being only a few seconds long. As it turned out, this changed the game, as we not only became able to begin together in various ways, but we noticed that "We begin" would drastically improve the musical quality of our larger improvisations (so much so that this could be thought of as a discovery in itself, deserving a separate chapter). Stapleton and I had completed our shared voice by developing a shared sense of beginning. With Rose, this kind of beginning had been an unspoken given, even in our first encounter back in March 2016. Yet now, separated by curtain and distance, we enter *slightly* out of time, albeit in matching dynamic and attitude. The temporal shift – slight as it may be – between Rose's first (0:10) and my second and third notes, immediately becomes a point of interest, with us returning to that first utterance three times. In the first return (0:16) I enlarge the distance; the second return at 0:26 (after a short silence) re-enacts the out-of-time beginning (this time the distance is even *slighter*, Rose's toneless sound is first, out tones set in together), with the third return at 0:34 enlarging the temporal distance further, after which we bring the first shape to a close together (0:42). Three seconds of joint silence. Starting as we (0:45). We missed, pondered, and found the joint beginning together, through the first frail phrase. Sustained notes allow for some blending, a few unisons, a first tonality. After two brief foregrounding gestures by Rose (1:00) and myself (1:06), then both of us (a slow tilting semitone motive with some timbral overlap yet registral distance) until the silence at 1:25, the gesture from the beginning returns, back to being out of time. Distraction (mine) dispels the ties until, after yet another silence, we try hard to match at an increased volume (oddly trying to hear each other better but producing a clichéd group of joint short sonic bursts). I shift to a repeating chord with dynamic variations, yet the curtain muffles my harmonics and resonances and undercuts Rose's attempts for spectral blending. After Rose's lone return to an earlier colour of his tone and via a silence at 3:29, we end through my separate ending reminiscent of that frail opening tone colour. Zooming into a recorded performance to this level of detail lays open how we are *trying*, in every miniscule moment and aspect of sound, to create coherence *through* sensing the other's state as present in both the quality of the sound – i.e., the sensitivity to time, timbre, articulation – and the unfolding composition – i.e., the working sense of structure, rhythm, gesture. Restrictions in sensing the other's presence in this – like muffled overtones – lead to divergence and fragmentation. It is not just any listening that we apply; we are listening out for the other's *sensibility*, the other's nuanced expressive presence. We are trying to listen through to them and, when we succeed, coherence ensues. The second piece or movement of *Curtain I* (starting 3:54) is a case in point: Rose limits himself to timbrally, dynamically, and temporally varied trills, while I limit myself to repeated chords, with strings variously dampened or let to vibrate in shades by the right hand. At 5:21, the atmosphere changes, we both reduce action space even further to sustained repeating notes/chords, and I start to play inside or on the margins of Rose's sound, finding ways to converge, finding expressive balance, finding a shared voice. Upholding the balance, we build and repeat states of tension (6:30–50 and 6:54–7:28) and release affected through a single note change within the overall sonority and texture. The way we succeed in finding a shared area of timbral interest and uphold the sensitivity to that area creates such strong proximity that the spatial distance and sonic impediments seem completely overcome. In the third movement, the process of tuning in into each other's sensitivities and area of expressive presence is rather lengthy; I shall refrain from a detailed description in this context.

In *Curtain II* (Rose behind curtain) we reverse the spatial situation; there are again about 8–10 metres between us, this time Rose is completely obscured from my view by the curtain, nor can he see me. The curtain now being between us, and with Rose playing in the recess' tiny space against the glass walls, he is engulfed by his own sounds, while mine are at a remove, suffering additionally from passing through the curtain. The duo starts loosely, as two individual players, clearly reaching out, spinning long gestures in the hope of catching enough from the other to still compose together, which leads to a fair success of a joint narrative after minute 4. (A note in passing: As in *Curtain I*, the video montage of two camera positions side by side places us in an artificial visual proximity; yet the oddities at the borders between the images reveal the gap, just as listening to Curtain I with headphones reveals the separation of the instrument's sounds that might appear more joint than they actually are when listening back from simple loudspeakers.)

The limitation to small variations within a sustained textural sonority enables us to connect even in cases of greater disturbance and perturbance. In *Sax under piano*, Rose is lying straight on his back right under the piano, with his head close to the grand's back leg. He partly filled his saxophone with water on the spur of the moment. Thus we can hardly hear, and certainly not see, each other: not only is the piano's body between us, blocking, swallowing, reflecting, and dispersing much of the spectrum of his sound (engulfing him), my own playing, in turn, floods my frontal hearing space. The oddly incarcerated scene and the self-inflicted water-blockage (the result of which neither Simon Rose nor I never heard before) prompts me to start with a bodily inhibition: using a technique I first arrived at during a research residency with Bennett Hogg in which we explored unusual relations between imagining and doing, I begin to play a fast, intricate ten-finger broken texture slightly above the keyboard, imagining the sound I would make, but not actually making a sound. Slowly lowering my hands, arms, and upper body, I gradually let the pattern release into sound, so that initially, only the noise my fingers make on the top of the keys are heard, then joint by slowly gathering individual notes. Rose starts with bursts of fluttering noises that turn into bubbling, joint by a low drone-like growl. We jointly enter a highly active overtone-rich texture (although any detailed listening to each other is impossible), which we uphold, submerging and emerging out of each other's sound. Rose unfathomably navigates the extremely gradual changes and shifts between watery tones and crackly noise solely via lip, tongue, and breath control, breathing circularly through the entire piece. Swells in mid- and high register parts of the highly animated texture at matching pitches precede a joint burst into a shriek like sonority. As inchoate as our shared voice is, it brims with recognition, resistance, fear, hope, exhilaration, inhibition. I hear this brooding sound as simultaneously endangered (suffocating, screaming, fluttering) and dangerous (growling, relentless, engorging). Our coarticulations work, we remain in and move through this tense gesture together.

Concentrating our sensitivity on a shared presence in timbral expression (like in *Sax under piano*), or on a shared sense of time (as in *Curtain I*), gives us something to sense the other in, making the connection expressive of character rather than arbitrary or mechanic. Rose and I found this to hold true even in an experiment called *Hörspiel*, in which Rose, instead of playing the saxophone, whisperingly read a passage from Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. His prosody and my sparse spacious resonant intervals from the piano (shifting weight between the registers) sufficed to catch each other's sense of time and urgency, leading us to sudden points of precise synchrony and coarticulation (voice and piano sound becoming one) at textual highlights.

Did we ever lose an expressive connection completely? Yes. In *Headphones*, an experiment in which both Rose and I wore closed headphones, with sound recordist Vincent Ederle moving through the space using a directional microphone routed to the headphones, we were actually unable to overcome the distance introduced by the mediatisation, and produced clichéd, pointless, decentred playing that lacked responsiveness. While the result was not entirely mediocre throughout due to some *solistic* intensity, it was to us a frustrating display of succumbing to

the auditory limitation and distraction and resorting to a conventional "wordy" style, doodling even, and falling short of arriving at a shared expressive character: no shared tonality, no shared timbral space, no gestural coarticulation, no shared sense of time; many notes empty of empathic relation – something Rose and I wanted to forget (despite its usefulness in the research context) and even refused to listen to immediately after the event, as Hauke notes in her research report.[2]

3 Lessons from Straining the Shared Voice

Summarising the point of, and insight from, the experiments: what is lacking, or fragile, under the influence of the interventions, is not the basic playing together – we still were – but a substantial and subtle expressive (character) cohesion. We react to the situational restrictions on the duo by resorting to stability, restraint, and limitations in means, choices, and developments, creating a looser weave, so to speak, which is a less expressively lucid one (although it is fascinating with how little intersubjectivity can still emerge if mutual empathy is high: we often find loopholes to each different situational impediments, shifting attention to temporal, or timbral, or gestural action spaces where shared sensibility can still unfold). Constraints in hearing mean that we still listen, but in that too, little is given to us in expressive nuance for us to be able to empathise and build a deep reciprocal connection. We are listening out, but while sounds do reach us, the other's personal presence – like a partly masked face – reaches us too faintly, thereby narrowing, fragmenting, and incapacitating the shared expressive work. We still take risks, but our sonic offers to the other often go astray, not just in structural terms, but in terms of building areas of shared sensitivity. The work then becomes rudimentarily connected, with an audible lack of shared feel: fewer shared gestures and coarticulations, slower responsivity, increased individual memory work and bodily patterns, narrower timbral work, fainter pulsation, loss of a shared sense of time, arbitrary tonality, rare atmospheric changes, few points of unison, little counterpoint, etc.

In what sense do we hear the other's expressive presence or affective reality? This is, of course, a chapter in itself; but, in the present context of freely improvised music where sonic qualities rather than conventions of tonal practices play a decisive role, there is abundant bodily expressivity, both in direct ways and in the specific form Peter Goldie (2000: 133–4) calls "adverbial expressivity": One might hear the other playing *tentatively*, *affectionately*, *brokenly*, *hastily*, *insistingly*, *burstingly*, *exasperatedly, growlingly*; the sound appears like speaking or singing *calmly* or *shriekingly*, breathing *hastily*, scratching *angrily*, thumping *thunderously*, whistling *feebly*, sloping *mournfully*, growling *threateningly*, resonating *assertively*. (Note that there is no isomorphy between bodily effort of instrumental playing and bodily expressivity as heard *in* the sound; one can make a strained sound without straining, and one can strain one's hand at the keyboard for a large but unstrained, consonant interval.) The expressive character is related to the action character, of the *instrumental* action, but also of an *imagined* action. This kind of expressivity as heard in the action of the other is, at first, due to spontaneous empathy (what is called low level empathy): we hear – and feel (Peters 2015) – the character in the action. But, in staying turned towards the other – already during the course of an improvisation, but also over a larger extent of time – we grasp a more complex expressivity of the other's personal character (higher level empathy). Differently put, we learn something about the other at the moment of playing, through the musical decisions they make, not only in material or functional terms, but in affective terms (what experience to stick with, follow up, engage in, or distance oneself from). Finally, there is also an expressivity heard in the overall musical result – the expressivity of what Jerrold Levinson conceives in terms of a "persona," Roger Scruton called "no one's," and I have called the "Musical Other." In the present case, where the musical course ensues live between improvisers, musical character becomes the place in which the expressivities of players and musical other combine. That is, it is, paradoxically, fictional (as in the musical other's) and personal (as in his or mine). This is what we play *with* in playing together, this

is what the dialogue – whenever it ensues – is *about*.[3] Affectivity is permanently proposed; then *we* do something with it, venture into its intricacies, explore its paths, conflicts, and contrasts, decentring sympathetically with autonomous integrity. The dialogue is marked by an iridescence between self-expression, character-expression, and developing fiction, as we empathetically follow up, antipathetically resist or block, or sympathetically take on the feeling, together exploring moments of truth, self-revelation, and fictionality in emotional improvisation.

4 Conclusion

In a state of empathic perception, feeling him, myself, it, and us, through the music (as his, my, and our action) the empathic grasp of feeling qualities is what enables us to make our joint actions a joint *emotional* work. This confirms why it makes sense to distinguish empathy from sympathy or compassion in naming the phenomenon of distinctly experiencing the other's expression, and hearing his (or her) state therein. Over and over again, there are distinct moments of choice: do I accept this musical offering as my (and our) feeling, or do I leave it as hers, his, its? Do I work from empathy, or in sympathy? Will this inkling grow to a full blown state? And can I hear that I am being heard? Is trust emerging? Do we hold this state together? Where in the landscape of possible affect does reciprocity lead the emotional narrative through and to? What happens when we empathise or even sympathise with uncomfortable musical suggestions? Empathy in improvisation is, thus, the gateway to an intersubjective affective and expressive realm from the mundane to the existential: the inner workings of "chemistry."[4]

Notes

1 The "Emotional Improvisation FWF/PEEK: AR188" project was funded by the Austrian Science Fund (2014–19) and involved lab-work and lab-concert performances with twenty-four guest researchers in duo (mainly), trio, and quartet settings with myself: improviser and composer Dr. Bennett Hogg (electronics/violin, Newcastle University), Dr. John Ferguson (electronics/guitar, Brown University), Sabine Vogel (flutes, Berlin), composer and performer Dr. Gerriet K. Sharma (electronics, Graz), Ritwik Banerji (saxophone/electronics, Berlin), Tatjana Bliem (voice, Graz), Magdalena Chowaniec (dance/choreography, Vienna), Dr. Emma Lloyd (violin, Edinburgh/Paris), musicologist and improviser Prof. Dr. Ellen Waterman (flute/voice, St. John's Memorial University), Rachel Austin (voice, songwriter), Dr. Simon Rose (saxophones, Berlin), improviser and inventor Prof. Dr. Paul Stapleton (BoSS, Queen's University/SARC Belfast), composer and performer Stevie Wishart (hurdy gurdy/violin, Brussels), Prof. Dr. Stefan Östersjö (guitars, Malmö), Vietnamese zither-virtuoso Thuy Thanh Nguyen (Dan Tranh, Malmö), Alexander Deutinger (dance/choreography, Graz), Dr. Reinhard Gagel (piano/accordion, Berlin), cinematographer, performer and inventor Katharina Hauke (mikrokontrolleur/voice, Berlin), Dr. Jonathan Impett (trumpet, Ghent), Dr. Bertl Mütter (trombone/horn, Vienna), improviser and composer Dr. Chris Williams (double bass, Berlin), Jadi Carboni (dance/choreography, Berlin), Almuth Kühne (vocal artist, Berlin), and Joshua Hyde (saxophone, Melbourne).

2 "*Weder Peters noch Rose wollten in den Listening-/Viewing-Sessions das Video von diesem Versuch sehen oder Audio hören. Sie konnten sich mit ihrem Spiel nicht identifizieren und aus ihrer Sicht war das Experiment gescheitert*" ("Neither Peters nor Rose wanted to see the video or listen to the audio of this experiment during the listening/viewing sessions. They could not identify with their playing and in their view the experiment had failed"); Katharina Hauke, research report of 1.3.2018, p. 15.

3 I have in mind what Martin Buber in his *Dialogue* called *genuine* dialogue:

> There is genuine dialogue – no matter whether spoken or silent – in which each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their present and particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a living mutual relation between himself and them.
>
> *(Buber 1932: 196; 1954: 214 ff.)*

4 Research for this chapter was supported by the Austrian Science Fund FWF within the artistic research project "Emotional Improvisation" FWF/PEEK:AR188.

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30

IMPROVISATION IN POP-ROCK MUSIC

Stefano Marino

1 Preliminary Remarks: Improvisation in Life and Art

Improvisation is a fundamental and unavoidable aspect of the human experience in general, a specific trait of human practices, often linked to expertise or competence, that displays itself at various levels in all dimensions of life. Unless we believe in the totally predetermined character of all events, every action seems to imply, to a greater or a lesser degree, contingency and the possibility of facing the surprising, the unknown, the unforeseen and the unexpected (Bertinetto 2016a: 189–220). Thus "the performance of any action involves elements of improvisation" (Bertinetto 2018a: 131), and hence the latter can be understood as a human ability and practice by no means limited to art but rather one rooted in life as such. To some extent we improvise at work, in our personal relationships, during a conversation, while having sex, when taking an exam, when driving our car and in many other aspects of our everyday life in general.

If improvisation is a genuinely human practice and a true component of human experience in general, it can nevertheless be argued that it is particularly significant in the performing arts – where improvisation is quite often intentionally practiced as a means for producing art, a "development of creativity in real-time," a "creative rearrangement not only of materials […] but also of forms, styles, conventions, techniques, and habits" (Bertinetto 2018a: 131 f.) – that the specific features of improvisation manifest themselves in perhaps the clearest way and become fully explicit, thus facilitating also a philosophical understanding of this practice. In the broad, variegated and articulated realm of the arts, music is surely one of the artistic practices in which improvisation plays a major role and represents "a common – indeed, perhaps basic – feature of music throughout the world" (Brown 2011: 59). Indeed, "not all performances have always come about by virtue of a performer's following a fully specifying score," as we have been used to thinking in the Western tradition of so-called serious music only for a few centuries: "many performances of music involve improvisation; many presuppose that performers will embellish and follow general principles associated with genre and occasion – in fact most musical performances do so, especially of a non-classical kind" (Goehr 1992: 31).

Although improvisation has played a constitutive role in the development of music as such throughout the world in all ages and all places, if we focus on contemporary music it is probably jazz that, rightly or wrongly, is usually considered as involving "the most highly developed improvisation" that "calls for performance values unlike those that are important in classical music" (Davies 2005: 490). In other words, in our time it is probably jazz that is commonly viewed by most listeners as "the paradigm example of improvisation" (Brown 2011: 59), and it is not by

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chance that it has been emphatically defined as "the infinite art of improvisation" (Berliner 1994). As an implicit confirmation of this primacy commonly assigned today to jazz when it comes to musical improvisation, theorists such as Robert Nozick or Michael Tomasello, in referring to the component of improvisation implied in basic experiences of human life like sexuality or thinking, immediately choose jazz as a paradigm. Nozick, in investigating sexuality as a fundamental dimension of human life, explains that "[l]ike musicians in jazz improvisation, sexual partners are engaged in a dialogue, partly scored, partly improvised, where each very attentively responds to the statements in the bodily motions of the other" (Nozick 1990: 64). Tomasello, in turn, in presenting his original hypothesis of shared intentionality as a fundamental element of a natural history of human thinking, claims that, although "[t]hinking would seem to be a completely solitary activity,"

> for humans thinking is like a jazz musician improvising a novel riff in the privacy of his own room. It is a solitary activity all right, but on an instrument made by others for that general purpose, after years of playing with and learning from other practitioners, in a musical genre with a rich history of legendary riffs, for an imagined audience of jazz aficionados. Human thinking is individual improvisation enmeshed in a sociocultural matrix.
>
> *(Tomasello 2014: 1)*

2 Some Observations on the Concepts of "Popular," "Pop" and "Rock"

However, jazz is only one among the many different musical genres in which improvisation plays a significant role. Although jazz, along with "radical," "free" or "non-idiomatic" forms of improvised music, is the kind of music most people tend to associate with improvisation, this must not eclipse the fact that improvisation has played and continues to plays an equally relevant role in other musical genres. Here I will stress the significance improvisation had and has – at different levels, in different ways and to higher or lower degrees – in the context of so-called "pop-rock music."

Before discussing this significance, it is important to offer some information and clarification about the notion "pop-rock music." In the field of musicology the notion of "popular music" has often proven to be difficult to define in a clear, unequivocal and rigorous way, in particular due to the different interpretations of the idea itself of "popular" and the different methodological approaches. "Study of popular music is now an established academic field," which, as has been noted, "continues to grow and thrive in spite of […] a failure to agree about the meaning of popular in popular music," given that "[several] distinct concepts of the popular are at work here" (Gracyk 2007: 7). So, while many people probably tend to spontaneously associate the notion of "popular music" with the kind of music mostly heard on the radio and other mass media, this does not exclude the fact that, depending on the semantic breadth of the notion of "popular" employed, blues and jazz can also be considered forms of popular music. For example, as noted by Alyn Shipton apropos of jazz, "its history is inextricably bound up with the development of popular music as a whole" (Shipton 2001: 12).

In recent times, Alva Noë has proposed that we simply use the term "pop music" "for a whole gamut of musical forms: rock, rhythm and blues, soul, hip-hop, top forty, reggae, but, importantly, not jazz, folk, or the music of the Broadway musical" (Noë 2015: 168). Now, I consider highly questionable and quite controversial some of Noë's claims according to which "pop music […] looks like music, but it isn't," because people, for him, don't "engag[e] with it *as music*" but rather appreciate it *only* for external factors such as the exhibition, spectacle, fascination and "aura" of the star system, blind obedience to fashion, and the personality, charisma and sex appeal of the musicians (Noë 2015: 168–72). In my view, Noë's all too critical account of what he calls "pop music" is the umpteenth example in recent times of what Richard Shusterman had already diagnosed in the early 1990s as a typical tendency of intellectuals to denigrate and vilify "popular

art or mass culture […] as mindless, tasteless trash," without recognizing the fact that popular art provides us with "too much aesthetic satisfaction to accept its wholesale denunciation as debased, dehumanizing, and aesthetically illegitimate," not to mention the fact that popular art often "has the power to enrich and refashion our traditional concept of the aesthetic." Quite significantly, Shusterman's favorite example is precisely rock music, "which can be so intensely absorbing and powerful that it is likened to spiritual possession," and which "suggest[s] a radically revised aesthetic with a joyous return of the somatic dimension which philosophy has long repressed" (Shusterman 2000: 169, 173, 178, 184). However, notwithstanding my criticism of some of Noë's views on this topic, I agree with him that a concept like "pop music," used in a broad sense, can be useful to immediately identify a variety of genres and subgenres on the basis of certain "family resemblances" between them.

One might still object that "rock" and "pop" (narrowly understood) are musical forms based on different principles and have different aesthetic traits (Mecacci 2011: 147–62). Moreover, one might argue that "rock," not "pop," must be understood as "a universal language" ("rock is both Elvis and Brian Eno," and "even what does not sound like 'rock,' in principle, falls within its history") (Maurizi 2018: 141), drawing the conclusion that "rock" should not be included in the concept of "pop" but, on the contrary, certain artists and bands commonly defined as "pop" should be included in the history of "rock" (see Scaruffi 1989–97). As observed by Robert Fripp,

> [r]ock is the most malleable musical form we have. Within the rock framework you can play jazz, classical, trance music, Urubu drumming. Anything you like can come under the banner of rock. It's a remarkable musical form. […] One can, under the general banner of rock music, play in fact any kind of music whatsoever.
>
> *(Tamm 1990: 20 f.)*

Anyway, as has been noted by Theodore Gracyk, "musical category is a matter of genealogy as much as sound":

> In viewing a large chunk of popular culture as rock, we operate at a relatively abstract level […]. As such, "rock" operates largely as an ideological abstraction, not as the label of an observable property of the phenomena it unifies. […] The concept of rock, like that of jazz, is an umbrella for a wide range of musicians and performance styles with some common antecedents and influences.
>
> *(Gracyk 1996: XI, 5)*

On this basis, and given the delimited and specific purposes of the present contribution, I will follow here Noë's functional suggestion to simply use the notion of "pop" for a gamut of musical forms ranging from rock 'n' roll to "examples of avant-garde commodities" (Middleton 1990: 43) in certain sophisticated forms of contemporary popular music. At the same time, due to the abovementioned terminological and conceptual problems, I will also add "rock" to my definition. Thus, in the following pages, I will always use the expression "pop-rock."

So, what is the role played by improvisation in pop-rock music? Without any claim of completeness, in the next sections I will examine some of its dimensions. As noted by Bill Bruford – an extraordinary improviser who, as is well-known, was active for several decades as drummer in such bands as Yes, King Crimson and Earthworks, collaborating also with Ralph Towner, Eddie Gomez, Annette Peacock, David Torn, etc.:

> the idea that the unforeseen or the surprising are foundational constructs of creativity is becoming commonplace. The "unforeseen" is linked through its Latin etymology to the

> notion of improvisation, a key skill of the jazz performer as she or he deals literally with the unforeseen in real time.
>
> *(Bruford 2018: 199)*

Mutatis mutandis, the same thing also holds true for performers of pop-rock music. Just like jazz – although, of course, in different ways, with different musical features and sometimes to a less developed degree – pop and rock also "challenge the traditional division between the musical work and its performance" (Gracyk 1996: 170), sometimes conferring an essential significance to the (partial or total) reinterpretation of a song in real time during the performance.

3 Varieties of Improvisation in Pop-Rock Music: The Relation Between Performance, Composition and Recording

Starting from the relation between improvisation, performance, composition and recording, it is a well-known fact that both performance and composition (as well as recording) play an important role in pop-rock music. According to Gracyk, "[a] rock aesthetic, a general theory about rock music as an object of critical attention, […] must focus on recorded music" (Gracyk 1996: IX). There are good reasons to agree with this view and to consider it convincing in the case of certain works belonging to the broad and complex field of pop-rock music in which the recorded version of a song may have a primacy over the live performance (leaving aside here the potential questions of musical ontology concerning the changing status of a piece in a live performance or in a recording). An example can be the fourth take of Bob Dylan's "Like a Rolling Stone" from July 16, 1965 that, according to Mecacci (2011: 8), captured the real essence of that song in an unrepeatable way precisely in that recorded version, and of course it is possible to make reference to many other examples of single songs (and also to entire albums).

However, such a primacy of recorded music must be counterbalanced by the acknowledgment of the essential significance of *performance* in pop-rock music. While the fundamental quality and value of certain pop-rock artists or bands stands out mostly in their recordings, which surpass and even outdo the aesthetic quality and value of every possible live performance of the same songs (for example, due to an extensive and sometimes experimental use of overdubbing or other technological effects created by producers and sound engineers in the recording studio, or due to still other factors), in other cases the opposite is true: namely, the importance and "legendary" character (so to speak) of certain artists or bands mostly derives from their exciting live performances, which thus have a primacy over the recorded work and quite often also involve a significant amount of improvisation. In these cases, fans are likely to claim that no recording will ever capture the energy, intensity and freedom of the performance of a live concert experienced in person, especially when the artist or band in question is famous for improvised jams on stage. For certain artists or bands, such as The Grateful Dead and many more, the "primary strength is live performance. They consistently rank as top concert draw and their core audience trades and compares tapes of their live shows with the devotion of Charlie Parker fans comparing alternate takes of his improvisations" (Gracyk 1996: 82). As has been noted apropos of King Crimson (but in a way that can be easily applied also to other pop-rock musicians and bands), "the 'way of doing things,' the factor of hazard, are difficult if not impossible to capture on recordings" (Tamm 1990: 20), and are actually an integral part of what makes pop-rock music unique and, of course, an integral part of the practice of improvisation.

Returning now to the question of the connection between performance, composition and recording, it is quite interesting to note that improvisation plays an important role in pop-rock music precisely at the level of the relation or even intersection between these different dimensions. For example, let us think of the way in which the musical character (and, besides this, also the commercial success) of certain famous pop-rock songs has been sometimes determined, among other things, by the

presence of a component of improvisation in the composition and/or the recording. "Like a Rolling Stone" is a good example in this context, given that before recording the version that would later be published and widely recognized as one of the greatest masterpieces in this musical genre, Dylan and his band had unsuccessfully demoed the song several times. It was only when they decided to play it in a more rock-oriented style and, in particular, when a session musician named Al Kooper improvised an organ riff – thanks to which (beside the melody and the lyrics worthy of a Nobel Prize, of course) the track would immediately become recognizable and unique – that the real essence of the song was fully grasped and brought to completion. In this case, a small and somehow accidental improvisation by a sideman spontaneously emerged during a performance in the recording studio and proved to be of decisive importance for the definition of the shape, the sound, the meaning and also the fame of a song, eventually becoming the object of innumerable attempts at imitation.

Other examples can be found in the work of Robert Fripp, starting from his famous collaboration on David Bowie's album *Heroes*. In 1977, Fripp was in New York when he suddenly received a phone call from Brian Eno and Bowie who were recording in Berlin and who had experienced some problems with certain guitar parts for the new songs. They invited Fripp to join them and take part to the recording, and Fripp, who had spent a few years in a state of self-imposed retirement, flew to Berlin and offered a contribution that would soon prove to be a genuinely decisive component for the musical value of *Heroes*. Slightly different versions of that legendary phone conversation report that Fripp replied to Bowie's and Eno's invitation: "Well, I haven't really played guitar for three years […] but I'll have a go!'" or: "Well, I haven't really played for three years – but, if you're prepared to take a risk, so will I" (see Tamm 1990: 89, and also the Wikipedia entry on *Heroes*). As for the subsequent recording sessions, upon arriving at the recording studio, and still suffering from jet lag, Fripp was invited to immediately play something, "with no rehearsals, no plans and no written chords": he recorded a guitar part for "Beauty and the Beast," the opening track of *Heroes*, and the first take, largely improvised, was used in the final mix of the song, thus establishing a sort of virtuous cycle between improvisation, performance, composition and recording (Bertrando 1984: 109). As a matter of fact, there was a strong component of improvisation involved in a creative process of this kind, as already testified by Fripp's abovementioned expressions "I will take a risk" or "I'll have a go": "[Fripp] enjoyed the freedom Bowie gave him: Bowie would roll a tape he'd been working on, and Fripp would simply ad lib straight over the top, with little or no premeditation or planning" (Tamm 1990: 89).

Beside the collaboration with Bowie, other examples taken from Fripp's long and exciting musical career testify to the role that improvisation can play also in the context of pop-rock music. In September 1972, Fripp was invited by Eno to his home studio, which was equipped with a system of tape recorders that made it possible to produce original loop effects that Fripp immediately and successfully experimented with. Indeed, within less than one hour Eno and Fripp had produced a twenty-minute piece entitled "The Heavenly Music Corporation," published as Side One of *No Pussyfooting*, their album released in 1973, and described by Fripp with the following words: "All improvisation. Pure improvisation. […] [Fripp] plugged in and played. It was easy: you are here, just do it" (Bertrando 1984: 107). As is well-known, in that very same period Fripp had also formed a new line-up of King Crimson with musicians such as John Wetton on bass and vocals, David Cross on violin and mellotron, Bill Bruford on drums and Jamie Muir on percussion, "whose list of avant-garde credits included work with saxophonist Evan Parker, guitarist Derek Bailey, the Battered Ornaments and Boris": "Muir […] appeared to Bruford as a direct link with 'the world of free jazz and inspiration'" in a context fundamentally definable as "rock" like that of King Crimson:

> There was *a renewed emphasis on improvisation* in live performance in King Crimson's music of this period – but *not the kind of improvisation common in jazz and rock*, where one soloist at a time takes center stage and riffs and rhapsodizes, running through his chops while the rest of

> the band lays back and comps along with set rhythm and chord changes. In its best moments, King Crimson improvisation during this period was *a group affair, a kind of music-making process in which every member of the band was capable of making creative contributions at every moment*. Mindless individual soloing was frowned upon; rather, *everyone had to be listening to everyone else at every moment, to be able to react intelligently and creatively to the group sound*. This was a period when Fripp stressed the "magic" metaphor time and again; for to him, when *group improvisation* of this sort really clicked, it was nothing short of bona fide white magic. Violinist/keyboardist David Cross described the process this way: "We're so different from each other that one night someone in the band will play something that the rest of us have never heard before and you just have to listen for a second. Then you react to his statement, usually in a different way than they would expect. *It's the improvisation that makes the group amazing for me*. You know, taking chances. There is no format really in which we fall into. *We discover things while improvising* and if they're really basically good ideas we try and work them in as new numbers, all the while *keeping the improvisation thing alive and continually expanding*."
>
> *(Tamm 1990: 56 f., 59 (my emphasis: S. M.))*

Of course, the kind of unplanned, spontaneous and, most of all, collective improvisation developed by King Crimson in the period 1972–74 represents an exception rather than the norm in the world of pop-rock music, with some comparable examples that may include The Grateful Dead, The Jimi Hendrix Experience, Tim Buckley, The Velvet Underground, Pink Floyd, Soft Machine, Area, Sonic Youth, Einstürzende Neubauten, Tortoise and, to some extent, also more mainstream-oriented bands like Radiohead in their most experimental moments. In most cases, however, the role of improvisation in pop-rock music is narrower and usually more focused on the performance of the individual soloist – which is precisely the kind of partial or limited improvisation in pop-rock music that King Crimson and other bands radically aimed at putting into discussion and actually overcoming. Indeed, it must be said that the late 1960s and early 1970s probably represented a particularly fertile and prolific moment in the history of pop-rock music as far as experimentation and the development of unusual sources of creativity are concerned, including free and radical improvisation. As has been noted,

> [t]he *collective long-duration improvisations and semi-improvisations* that were so prevalent in the 1960s and 1970s embodied the era's conjectural societies and their rites, laboratories for hypothetical forms of commutuality […]. Extraordinary to think it now, but *some of the most successful bands in the history of popular music* – notably The Beatles, Rolling Stones and Pink Floyd – *dabbled in some aspects of free improvisation*, whether as players, listeners or benefactors. Lengthy one (or two)-chords jams, improvised noise freak-outs, guitar feedback, tape montages and out-of-tempo improvised passages were becoming almost obligatory for mid-1960s rock and funk groups with radical tendencies – Love, The Seeds, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, The Byrds, The Velvet Underground, The Fugs, Funkadelic, The Mothers of Invention, Santana, Chicago, Quicksilver Messenger Service, The Temptations, Red Crayola, Gong, The Grateful Dead.
>
> *(Toop 2016: 199 f. (my emphasis: S. M.))*

A slightly different example than the one previously mentioned with regard to a certain phase of the career of King Crimson can perhaps be best represented by the absolutely *sui generis*, eclectic and multifaceted Frank Zappa who, as is well known, experimented with such different musical genres as rock, pop, reggae, disco, punk, heavy metal, jazz, electronics and avant-garde music, and who fruitfully combined rigorous composition in the case of his symphonic works and a large amount of freedom in performance and improvisation in his most rock/jazz-oriented works. As

has been noted, "long instrumental improvisations/experiments" were surely one of the things "for which the Mothers [of Invention] were so famous": a record like *Uncle Meat* from 1969, for example, "with its mixture of tape, symphonic scoring, free jazz improvisation, blues, doo-wop, and everything in between, challenges all preconceived notions about your typical rock-and-roll record" (Fisher Lowe 2006: 64, 87). Zappa really appreciated improvisation as an approach to music and often used it in different ways and combinations in his work with different bands from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. Indeed, when comparing composing music using the Synclavier and playing live or in studio with real musicians, in his autobiography Zappa explicitly claimed that "[s]ome of the things live musicians do that machines don't do are good, and some are bad. One of the good things that live musicians do is *improvise*. They *respond to the moment*, and can play more expressively" – although, in his typically sarcastic and very edgy style, Zappa immediately added:

> But musicians tend to be lazy, and they get sick and skip rehearsals. In fact, they do the kinds of things that other people do in normal jobs. […] Machines don't get loaded, drunk or evicted and don't need assistance moving their families around in "emergency" situations. […] Subtracting the bullshit and the mistakes, if I had to choose between live musicians or La Machine, I must admit, from time to time I'm *almost* tempted to opt for the "human element."
> *(Zappa and Occhiogrosso 1989: 97)*

However, although in his early works with The Mothers of Invention Zappa sometimes did not disdain the practice of free-form and collective improvisation, in most cases his improvisations were guided by him as the undisputed leader and director of the band, be it a small combo or a large ensemble. In his autobiography, Zappa clarified some aspects of his particular method of guidance of improvisations, especially live in concert, explaining that he had gradually developed "an assortment of 'stock modules' in [his] stage arrangements" and a series of "cues on stage" to direct the instantaneous reinvention of a song by the band during a live performance: "Each guy in the band understands what the norms and 'expected mannerisms' are for these different musical styles, and will instantly 'translate' a song into that musical 'dialect'" (Zappa and Occhiogrosso 1989: 94). An attitude and approach that can perhaps be partially compared to Butch Morris' method of structural improvisation known as "conduction" or to similar methods developed by Anthony Braxton and John Zorn.

4 The Stimulating and Creative Role of Mistakes in Pop-Rock Improvisation

Anyway, the particularly sophisticated role played by improvisation in the music of Fripp and Zappa appears to be more an exception than the rule in the field of pop-rock music. In fact, as noted by Gracyk by way of a quick comparison between the typical and most frequent role played by improvisation in jazz and in rock,

> most jazz musicians conceive of their music in terms of individual performances, inviting individualized developments of musical motives, rather than being fixed compositions. When successful, each jazz performance, recorder or live, is an independent musical work. […] Of course, for jazz even the loosest jam session or improvisation requires an organizing schema, but the performance is tailored to the players' individualities and their resulting interaction. […] With rock music the organizing schema is seldom approached along these lines, yet there is [some] *freedom for personalization of the material* […]. Much of rock's personalization comes in rhythmic accents, timbre, texture, and vocal inflections. *Rock is not a complete stranger to improvisation* […]. *But it is not the norm*. Solos are often brief and largely planned out in advance. […] Rather than regarding rock as an opportunity for improvisation or a faithful manifestation

> of an independent musical work, *rock interpretation stakes out a middle ground* which fuses a song and the available performance means (including engineering) into a distinctive product of mass reproduction. […] While there are exceptions, jazz and rock usually involve a balance between the autonomy and cooperative production of its performers and technical personnel.
> *(Gracyk 1996: 169 f. (my emphasis: S. M.))*

So, much of the personalization of songs and also of improvisation in the field of pop-rock music concerns rhythmic accents, timbre, texture, vocal inflections and interplay between the musicians, as well as guitar, keyboard or drum solos. Now, certain kinds of pop-rock music may easily fall prey to the objection of being able to only practice what Adorno called "pseudo-improvisations" rather than genuine and real improvisations, because of their tendency to reduce the role of improvisation to a limited, merely patterned and, as it were, pre-digested embellishment of details in parts of the song whose function remains completely determined by the underlying harmonic and rhythmic schemes (see Adorno 2002: 437–46). However, as previously mentioned, other forms of pop-rock music justify more convincingly the claim that improvisation plays a significant role also in this field, as it happens in all the different cases in which the presence of established and style-compliant constraints, structures, schemata and habits does not lead to the confinement of the practice of improvisation to a mere substitution and embellishment of details in pre-determined parts of the song, but rather lets improvisation profoundly influence and modify the structure of the song itself and, thus, determine its development and its meaning. In general, it can be said, therefore, that improvisation in pop-rock music ranges from a minimum typically represented by the freedom granted to single musicians to insert extemporaneous "fills" in the song to a maximum (rarely) represented by radical, free and "outside the box" improvisation (Maurizi 2018: 113, 129).

Beside this, it must be noted with regard to guitar, keyboard or drum solos in pop-rock music, that sometimes the (partially or totally) improvised solos can be long and sophisticated, can reach high levels of technical refinement and quality and can be no less enviable than those of great jazz musicians. However, it may sometimes happen that the performance of a great soloist in pop-rock music lacks expressiveness or even disintegrates into boredom (rather than raising enthusiasm and excitement) because of the soloist's tendency to merely display his/her virtuosity during the (partially or totally) improvised solos, whereas it would be better to give primacy to directness and immediacy. For this reason, it may sometimes happen in pop-rock music that short and simple solos by self-taught and non-virtuoso musicians sound more powerful, expressive and convincing than those performed by technically well-trained and virtuoso musicians only interested in self-indulgent exhibitions of their technique. A good example, in this specific case, is represented by Neil Young, who is famous, among other things, for his long, open, technically simple but expressively intense, and often very noisy, improvised solos (for instance, in such legendary live albums as *Weld*), apropos of whose guitar style it has been correctly noted:

> The virtues of simplicity are too often ignored, especially when we start comparing works of art. Chad Taylor, the guitarist for the band Live, identifies Neil Young as his favorite guitar player. But Taylor's admiration is not directed at Young's virtuosity: "He is so limited, but there's something beautiful about that kind of simplicity in rock & roll".
> *(Gracyk 2007: 27)*

A comparison between the guitar solos of, respectively, Eric Clapton and Neil Young in the wonderful version of "My Back Pages" played at Bob Dylan's 30th Anniversary Concert Celebration very well exemplifies the contrast between the calculated "classicism" and, as it were, Apollonian formal perfection of Clapton's guitar solo and, vice-versa, the unstoppable vehemence and, so to speak, Dionysian exaltation of Young's noisy and almost free-form improvised solo.

Now, the practice of musical improvisation, broadly understood as a kind of intentional exposure to the unexpected, the unknown and the unforeseen, naturally implies a certain risk of making mistakes during a (partially or totally) unprepared and unplanned performance. Of course, sometimes a mistake is simply a mistake, i.e., an error during the performance that merely disturbs and interrupts the development of the musical discourse and, thus – depending on the gravity of the mistake and other factors – may corrupt or even destroy its meaning. However, as happens in jazz and other musical genres, so also in pop-rock, sometimes mistakes can prove to be not only something to avoid and to be afraid of in the name of an abstract ideal of perfection, but also something to fearlessly confront during a performance inasmuch as the experience of mistakes can be surprising occasions of creativity that force the performer to rethink and transform in real time the tune being played. In Pink Floyd's legendary *Live at Pompeii*, while playing a particularly powerful version of "One of These Days," Nick Mason famously lost one of his drumsticks, which is clearly a musical mistake that could happen at any time to any drummer, even great jazz virtuosos, and that, depending on the musician's capacities, may have different consequences at a musical level. In that case, Mason not only instantly reacts to the unexpected situation without interrupting his playing or panicking, but after promptly picking up a new drumstick he also proves capable of using this unforeseen problematic situation as a sort of incentive to further enhance the intensity and expressiveness of his drumming during the rest of the song, improvising some very powerful "fills" that fully compensate for his previous mistake and, thus, performing in the end a truly unforgettable version of "One of These Days." Developing the capacity to cope with the unavoidable possibility of mistakes (as part of human life, in general, and as part of artistic performances, in particular), understanding them and even using them as stimulating challenges or occasions to enhance one's creativity is an important aspect of jazz improvisation (Bertinetto 2016b, 2018b) and, although in different ways and quite often at a more limited or less sophisticated level, the same thing also holds true in pop-rock music.

Another example that can be profitably referred to in this context is Kurt Cobain's mistake at the beginning of Nirvana's famous hit "Smells like Teen Spirit" during their performance of the song at the band's now-legendary Live in Reading (1992). Although Cobain is precisely one of the examples mentioned by Noë in support of his abovementioned (and highly questionable) thesis that pop-rock music is devoid of any strictly musical significance, i.e., "[it] isn't primarily music" (Noë 2015: 175) and fans simply idolize singers without ever really listening to them, it is nevertheless well known that Cobain, as a composer and performer, was gifted with truly uncommon powers of expression, intensity and emotional strength. As observed by Brad Mehldau, one of the most original and sophisticated piano players of our time, who also offered a wonderful jazz version of "Smells like Teen Spirit" for piano solo in his 4-CD box *10 Years Solo Live*: "Kurt Cobain had that 'for-real' vulnerability, and it seemed he had no choice but to scream it out at us, completely unhinged, like a scared man-child. That's what made his expression so strong" (Mehldau 2015). Now, as brilliantly testified by the abovementioned version of "Smells Like Teen Spirit," the capacity to successfully cope with the permanent and irremovable possibility of mistakes can sometimes function as an unexpected source of inspiration and can lead musicians to excogitate new surprising solutions in real time, reacting in a quasi-instinctive way to the unexpected situation and instantly rethinking and changing a part of the song – thus confirming also in pop-rock music the idea of a "dynamic relation between 'mistakes' and normativity," i.e., the idea that "normativity […] is flux, *in fieri*" (Bertinetto 2016b: 127 f.). In that specific case, although the guitar part of the verse of "Smells like Teen Spirit" is very simple (actually consisting of only two notes repeated in a way that creates a sort of hypnotizing atmosphere), at first Cobain misses the right notes and everyone instantly recognizes the mistake. However, as can be clearly seen in the official video of that performance – now available on YouTube – Cobain somehow seizes the moment, uses the unexpected mistake as an occasion to immediately put to test his creativity and

promptly improvises a different and somehow nonsensical riff that nonetheless fits in very well with the structure of the song and is instantly blessed with a smile by Nirvana's bass player Krist Novoselic. Not only that but – probably inspired by the unforeseen accident in the first verse of the song and his extemporaneous but successful solution to that problem – when it comes to the guitar solo, Cobain, during the same live performance at the Reading Festival, suddenly and surprisingly inserts a noisy, chaotic, absolutely free-form and radically improvised solo that is completely different from the standard one that he would usually play and that may easily remind fans of 1990s alternative rock of the most experimental and vehement moments of Sonic Youth, definitely conferring a new, unthought-of and indeed unique quality to that specific live version of "Smells Like Teen Spirit." As has been noted,

> [a]lthough standards of artistic value are assumed before the musical performance, in accordance with the musical genre and the style of the musicians, they can also change during the development of the performance itself. The way […] performers cope with unpredictable performance situations produces the sense of the performance, that is, the *normativity* of that specific performance. This amounts to saying that the normativity of the performance does not only regulate what is happening within the performance, but emerges from what happens. In other words, normativity is open, rather than fixed, because it is constitutively moving along with the concrete development of the performance.
>
> *(Bertinetto 2018a: 120)*

5 Improvisation as Embodied Practice: The Example of Pop-Rock Drumming

Some philosophical contributions on musical improvisation, with a special focus on jazz, have proposed that we "solve the puzzle" concerning this particular practice with conceptual tools provided by, for example, modern and contemporary philosophers such as Kant, Wittgenstein and Derrida (cf., e.g., Bertinetto 2018c; Goldoni 2018a, 2018b; Bertinetto and Marino 2020). Other recent contributions on this topic have tried to investigate improvisation, and especially free jazz, by bringing it into conversation with Husserl's phenomenological analysis of time consciousness and retention-protention scheme (Angelino 2019). In the present context I would like to add Richard Shusterman's somaesthetics to this list, on the basis of the particular contribution that this approach can offer apropos of the role played by the body in musical practice, in general, and in improvised music, in particular.

As noted by Luca Marconi, "[e]very sound (either vocal or instrumental) is necessarily perceived in more or less direct connection to body attitudes and behaviors that are potentially able to produce an equivalent sound" (Marconi 2009: 49): so, "a presence of somatic phenomena" is always implied by music as such (Marconi 2010: 177). At the same time, however, Marconi adds that certain forms of music definitely emphasize "the bodily adhesion to the sound dimension" more than others: for example, "all 'African-derived genres' (above all jazz, but also blues and rock) promote and appreciate listening and paying attention to the bodily gestures through which every performer develops his/her personal way of playing music," whereas other musical styles tend to reduce the importance of the role of the body in the performance and, hence, as it were, "desomatize the sound" (Marconi 2009: 51, 60). Connecting in an original way these insights to those provided by Shusterman in his rehabilitation of popular art through the specific example of "African-derived genres" such as rock, funk and rap, we can see that the experience of this music

> can be so intensely absorbing and powerful that it is likened to spiritual possession. […] Rock songs are typically enjoyed through moving, dancing, and singing along with the music, often with such vigorous efforts that we break a sweat and eventually exhaust ourselves. […]

> Clearly, on the somatic level, there is much more effortful activity in the appreciation of rock than in that of high-brow music […]. The much more energetic and kinesthetic response evoked by rock exposes the fundamental passivity of the traditional aesthetic attitude of disinterested, distanced contemplation – a contemplative attitude that has its roots in the quest for philosophical and theological knowledge rather than pleasure.
>
> *(Shusterman 2000: 178–84)*

Shusterman recognizes the body's crucial role in music and argues that this recognition would need "to be taken a step further in a pragmatic direction": for him, "[m]ore than guitars or violins or pianos or even drums, our bodies are the primary instrument for the making of music," and also "more than records, radios, tapes, or CDs, bodies are the basic, irreplaceable medium for its appreciation." In general, "our bodies are the ultimate and necessary instrument for music" at all levels (Shusterman 2008: 126). Now, such a seemingly easy and, as it were, obvious remark as "our bodies are the primary instrument for the making of music" is actually very powerful in emphasizing an essential aspect of musical practice, sometimes neglected by philosophers: namely, the unavoidable somatic component of all music-making – including classical music: with its rigorous distinction between the composer and the performer, with its *Werktreue* ideal of performance, with its very precise postures prescribed to both the musicians and the listeners, etc. – that certain forms of musical performance take to the extreme, as in the particular case of improvised music.

Improvisation can be considered a genuine source of knowledge, and more precisely a kind of knowledge that is more a "knowing-how" than a "knowing-that" and a kind of knowledge that can be described in terms of "embodied skills" (Sparti 2005: 135). In performance arts like music and dance, the body plays indeed a very fundamental and special role, both in itself and in its tight and sometimes inseparable relationship with the musical instrument. This is true in general – and, thus, at all levels and in all musical styles or genres – but it is especially true in the case of (partially or totally) improvised music, in which the musicians, in order to be able to face the challenge of the unknown and the unexpected in the free interplay with their musical partners, with the audience and with the surrounding environment, must be really in sync with their instrument as if it were a part of their body. As observed by Shusterman in the typical melioristic spirit of somaesthetics that aims to fruitfully combine both theory and practice,

> the body deserves humanistic study to improve its use in the various artistic and scholarly pursuits that it underlies and serves. Musicians, actors, dancers, and other artists can perform better and longer with less attendant pain and fatigue when they learn the proper somatic comportment for their arts, how to handle their instruments and themselves so as to avoid unwanted, unnecessary muscle contractions that result from unreflective habits of effort, detract from efficiency and ease of movement, and ultimately generate pain and disability. […] Such learning of intelligent somatic self-use is not a matter of blind drill in mechanical techniques but requires a careful cultivation of somatic awareness.
>
> *(Shusterman 2006: 10)*

Improvisation often requires a relationship with the instrument that involves feeling as though it is something like an extension of one's own limbs and, thus, is based, among other things, on a strong and indeed unavoidable somatic component, i.e., on a fundamental role played by the body during the performance, with the musician's body completely involved and immersed in the performance. In the specific case of pop-rock music, let us think of the particular level of somatic involvement by the musician in the playing of music that is (partially or totally) "instantly composed" during the performance, and hence the often inimitable postures and uses of their bodies by such performers as Elvis Presley, James Brown, Mick Jagger, Pete Townshend, Jimi Hendrix, Janis

Joplin, Jim Morrison, Grace Slick, Carlos Santana, Jimmy Page, Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, Patti Smith, Bruce Springsteen, Freddie Mercury, Prince, Kim Gordon, Flea, Tori Amos, Jeff Buckley, PJ Harvey, Nick Cave, Beth Gibbons, Eddie Vedder, Thom Yorke and many others. On the one hand, the capacity to arrive at an adequate and accomplished level of improvisation in music (also in the field of pop and rock) requires a kind of musical knowledge that includes what we may call here *somatic knowledge*: a progressively increased knowledge of one's own body, of its potentialities and also of its limits. On the other hand, in a somaesthetic spirit of pragmatic meliorism, this may also prove to be a genuine source of improvement of one's capacities to use one's body in new, unexpected, creative ways. Learning to play an instrument so fluently as to be able to instantly compose or simply reinvent in real time a musical piece, as happens during improvisations at various levels, requires what Robert Fripp described as follows with reference to his development of particular guitar techniques: "There was a knowing in the hand through doing it for years which I consulted. […] My body knew what was involved, but I didn't know about it" (Tamm 1990: 15).

At this point, I would like to exemplify some of my previous theses by referring to what I consider a truly exemplary case, namely the explicitly and emphatically somatic relation of a drummer with his/her musical instrument. In fact, although the same phenomenon can be observed in pop-rock music in the case of guitar, bass, piano and saxophone players, and of course also singers, the example offered by drummers – due to the perhaps higher level of somatic involvement that drumming requires because of its very nature, with all the limbs of the body being simultaneously and in coordination active in beating drums, cymbals, cowbells and so on, so that the role of the body as agent in the creation of music becomes especially tangible in drumming – may prove to be more useful for our purposes. Different musical styles in pop-rock drumming, as exhibited and displayed especially in improvisations (such as particular "drum fills" during the song or also drum solos in the typical fashion of the 1970s), are indeed not only revealing of different technical skills, different aesthetic choices and taste preferences in the use of certain cymbals or drums, different shades and nuances in the application of single- or double-stroke rolls, paradiddles, single- or double-bass drum pedal techniques and all the other "rudiments" for drumming, but are also revealing of different "somatic styles" (Shusterman 2011).

Just to name a few examples of leading figures in modern pop-rock drumming that have become famous for their improvisation skills, please consider how inseparable Keith Moon's, Carl Palmer's, Ian Paice's or Lars Ulrich's passionate and overwhelming drum style is from their tumultuous physical approach to the instrument due to an unrestrained musical enthusiasm that, especially in Moon's case, sometimes leads to somewhat "uncoordinated" movements. Or, vice-versa, consider how inseparable Jeff Porcaro's, Gavin Harrison's, Matt Chamberlain's or Manu Katché's extraordinarily precise, calculated and metronomic drum style is from the accurately controlled and coordinated movements of all their limbs and parts of their bodies during the performance. Consider how inseparable Ginger Baker's, Jon Hiseman's, Bill Bruford's or Stewart Copeland's impeccable class, sensitivity and touch is from their relaxed, non-ostentatious and "disciplined" somatic style, even when playing very "undisciplined" and ferociously improvised tunes (freely using here the "discipline/indiscipline" conceptual pair, given Bruford's long-time involvement with at least three "incarnations" of King Crimson). Consider how inseparable John Bonham's, Dave Grohl's, Dave Lombardo's or Igor Cavalera's energetic, powerful and, so-to-speak, muscular drum style is from a posture that immediately shows, at the very level of their bodies' movements, the capacity to connect a high level of fluency and mastery of their instrument to a unique feeling for rhythm. Consider also how much the distinct drum styles of various drummers enrolled in a given pop-rock band in different years are also connected to, and reflected by, their dissimilar somatic styles; and how much this, in turn, can influence the entire band's practices of musical composition and performance at various levels, including improvisation. A useful example in recent pop-rock music may be those of the different musical and

somatic styles provided by Dave Krusen, Matt Chamberlain, Dave Abbruzzese, Jack Irons and Matt Cameron in the various stages of the career of Pearl Jam. Finally, consider how relevant and striking, eye-catching, impossible-to-pass-unnoticed is the connection between the purely musical dimension of drumming and its somatic dimension on the occasion of partially improvised duets or even trios starring drummers characterized by heterogeneous styles such as, for example, Pat Mastelotto and Bill Bruford in King Crimson from 1994 to 1997, or Butch Trucks and Jai Johanny "Jaimoe" Johanson in The Allman Brothers Band or still yet Pat Mastelotto, Gavin Harrison and Bill Rieflin in King Crimson from 2013 until 2019.

Interestingly, an account of musical creativity that also pays attention to the dimension of the surprise, the unforeseen and the unexpected (and thus improvisation), and that precisely exemplifies through drumming its conception of creativity and performance as a meditated, embedded and also embodied "action in context," has been offered by a pop-rock drummer, Bill Bruford, in his academic study *Uncharted: Creativity and the Expert Drummer* (2018: 3–14, 45–52, 199 ff.). Although Bruford's book is not specifically dedicated to trying to answer such questions as, for example, how embodied knowledge is present, needed and learned/developed in the case of improvisation in pop-rock drumming, in some chapters it nevertheless pays close attention to the somatic dimension of music with a focus also on improvisation. This is the case, for example, with his intriguing observations on the way in which musical activities (in the matter in question, those of pop-rock drummers)

> are governed by a cultural tradition that regulates and shapes the experience of creative practice, and take place within a community that mediates and promotes the psychological behavior and meaning-making of the individual. […] Embracing a particularly corrosive ideology, however, the broader drum culture (that enfolds the community) is something of an extreme case,

as testified to by a few "sets of issue" among which, for Bruford, prominently figures a deep-rooted anti-somatic prejudice deriving from no less than "the impact of the Cartesian mind/body split" (Bruford 2018: 16 f.). For Bruford, "the link between creativity and the drum culture" (that especially manifests itself during improvisations) is problematically "mediated by the corrosive influence of the culture's organizing ideology," defined as "the articulated system of meanings, values, and beliefs that can be abstracted as the 'worldview' of the drum community," and that, at least to some extent, seems to reinforce "distinctions between the culture of drummers and other instrumentalists," which can be connected to "Western music culture's perceived predisposition against the 'rhythmatist'" (Bruford 2018: 133). On this basis, Bruford criticizes a certain "historical insistence that notions of aesthetics, mind, harmony, and the intellect are superior to hedonism, body, rhythm" that "has become embedded" in a widespread but mistaken "drum ideology" that, in a philosophically ambitious way, he even dares to trace back "to René Descartes and the seventeenth century dualist notion of the 'mind/body split.'" Bruford observes – in a way that can be intriguingly compared to Shusterman's philosophical critique of the high culture/popular culture dichotomy – that "the equation of 'serious' with the mind and high culture, and 'fun' with the body and thus low culture, became established in the United States and Europe in the mid-nineteenth century," and that characteristically, while "a good classical performance [is] measured by the stillness it commands," "a good rock concert [is] measured by the audience's physical response and bodily movement" (Bruford 2018: 133).

Starting from these presuppositions, if we shift our attention to the specific case of performances (partially or totally) based on improvisation, also in pop-rock music, we can see some effects of "[t]his musical dichotomy of aesthetic/mind versus hedonistic/body" grounded in "the falsity of the mind/body split [and] the separation of thought from feeling" (Bruford 2018: 134, 136). That

is, we can understand and then criticize the still quite common but incorrect idea of "bodily responses [as] mindless" and, as a consequence of the high level of somatic involvement that drumming requires, "[t]he conception of drumming as 'mindless'" and the fact that "the Western kit drummer [has] become imbued with the primitive, the sexual, and the mindless" (Bruford 2018: 134 f.). With regard to this, the experience and practice of drumming in pop-rock music, that often involves also a component of improvisation, can offer a good example to support the efforts of somaesthetics to put aside traditional prejudices against the body and reevaluate its central role in art and performance. In turn, a somaesthetic critique of the neglect of the somatic that has been characteristic of a great part of Western philosophy and culture can provide a suitable theoretical framework for a revaluation of improvisation (in pop-rock drumming and, of course, also in other musical forms and with regard to other instruments), due precisely to the key importance of the involvement of the body in this practice. From this point of view, a somaesthetic approach to pop-rock music can offer crucial insights for a renewed understanding of some of its dimensions, including the role of improvisation. Conversely, the study of an open musical practice like improvisation can prove to be of valuable importance to broaden, enhance and deepen an open philosophical field like somaesthetics, which finds a favorable application in popular arts, such as pop-rock music.

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31

"IMPROVISATION" IN PLAY

A View Through South Indian Music Practices

Lara Pearson

1 Introduction

As someone who researches styles of Indian music typically labeled as "improvised," I find the notion of music improvisation to be endlessly troubling. Occasionally I catch myself using the term "improvised" for the sake of brevity, and then hate myself for doing so – because what do I mean by using this English-language term, forcing the colonial legacy on India and its music once again, when even within European traditions the concept has been problematized? This chapter charts my quest to find a better way to conceptualize music typically described as "improvised," to understand more fully what it is about such music that leads to use of the term, and to assess whether, after problematizing the concept, there remains anything of value in its application to musical practices.

My journey begins from current positions on the topic within musicology. In recent decades, musicologists have argued for the socio-historical contingency of the notion of "music improvisation," and have questioned the usefulness of the terms "improvisation" and "composition" in identifying distinct types of musical practices. Following Goehr (1989), Nooshin (2003) and Cook (2004), I argue that concepts of musical improvisation and composition are historically and culturally dependent, with the terms themselves often acting as tokens for notions quite distinct from their apparent or literal meanings. In particular, I argue that there is no sense in which music improvisation and composition can be viewed as lying in opposition to each other; instead, each one is part of the other, as improvisation in its broader sense (spontaneous creativity) is involved both in the process of music composition and in the performance of composed works, while composition (when defined as the act of putting things together) occurs during "improvised" music performance.[1]

In order to progress from these arguments that problematize improvisation as a category of musical activity, and to find more accurate ways to understand such music, I present an examination of creative processes in the South Indian style known as Karnatak music – a performance practice that developed historically in the royal courts and temples of South India, and that is now presented in concert halls and at temple festivals in the region.[2] This practice lends itself well to deliberations on music improvisation, as it possesses a wide range of formats that show varying degrees of proximity to prevailing concepts of improvisation and composition.[3] In order to consider music improvisation more broadly, I will compare processes involved in Karnatak music performance with those in two other styles that typically come to mind for English-speakers as being "improvised": namely jazz and free improvisation. These have, in some circles, become exemplars

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of what music improvisation is, and so, on this basis alone, need to be considered in this chapter. For each style, I focus on what musicians do in preparation for and during performance because, I suggest, it is through analysis of specific musical practices that prevailing concepts of improvisation can be problematized, and from which more appropriate understandings can be formulated.

In an attempt to move beyond the problematic concepts of musical improvisation and composition, the second half of this chapter presents an alternative way of conceptualizing music-making. I propose that it is fruitful to think of musical practices, as combining that which is *fixed* and that which is *in play*, where that which is fixed affords recognition and that which is in play presents leeway – latitude, room to move. Importantly, I argue that both aspects exist simultaneously in all styles; in any given phrase or format there may be elements that are *fixed* – that must be present in order for the phrase or style to be recognizable, while at the same time, there will be elements that are *in play* – where there is leeway, scope for the performer to move and be creative. Moreover, the features that are *fixed* and *in play* can vary from style to style, format to format, and any given musical element (phrase or process) may show fixity at some levels and play at others.

Finally, based on examination of the specific musical practices discussed and following from my deliberations on fixity and play, I explore a narrow concept of music improvisation that can briefly be defined as "play within and between pre-existing musical structures, with some goal in mind." The chapter closes with a discussion of how this concept of improvisation functions also in everyday (non-musical) improvisations, such as in conversation and other forms of interaction, and thus, in fact, emerges as being a broad and highly applicable conception of improvisation.

2 Historical and Social Context of the Improvisation/Composition Divide

The problematic status of the concept of "music improvisation" can be appreciated by considering its history, understanding the notion as situated in particular historical and cultural contexts. Lydia Goehr argues that the term "improvisation" acquired its modern meaning at the end of the 18th century. She connects this acquired meaning with the rise of the "work-concept," which emerged "as a result of a specific confluence of aesthetic, social, and historical conditions," leading music to be viewed as an "independent practice," "geared towards producing *enduring products*" and determined by "general concepts of fine art and the autonomous work of art" (Goehr 1989: 56). Aesthetic discourses of that time, which have persisted to some extent, supported notions of the composition as a perfected artifact, existing in the form of the musical score, and requiring faithful "reproduction" by performers (Cook 2004). Nicholas Cook reveals the "performance as reproduction" paradigm to be an idealization; in practice, performers of composed works make countless decisions – sometimes planned, sometimes in the moment – about how a given work is performed, rendering each performance substantially different (2004). This type of performance-based creativity is more usually termed "interpretation," and is typically viewed as being distinct from "improvisation," notwithstanding the fact that many qualities, including spontaneity and performer freedoms, are shared by both "improvisation" and "interpretation." As Richard Cochrane notes, "The practice of improvisation in fact exists in all musical performances except for those carried out solely by machines" (2000: 140).

Here we have our first hint that, in practice, music improvisation cannot be distinguished from composition through qualities typically ascribed to it. Qualities such as spontaneity and freedom exist both in the interpretation of composed works and in "improvisation," while reliance on pre-composed material also exists in both formats. Instead of attempting definition through associated qualities, the concept of musical improvisation is better understood as arising within a particular social and historical context in opposition to composition. Without the idealized concept of the musical work – the composition – as something complete and perfect in itself, there is no need for the musical category of improvisation. Around the world, musical practices manage

perfectly well with no concept of a distinction between "composed" and "improvised" music. Instead local names are given to the various formats that make up a style, which typically do not lie in opposition to each other in the way that composition and improvisation are now considered in contexts influenced by European notions. For example, in Indian music, there was no word equivalent to "music improvisation" until the early 20th century when the terms *manodharma saṅgīta* and *kalpana saṅgīta* (both meaning something akin to "music of the imagination") were coined to refer to those musical formats that were not "compositions" (Kassebaum 2000: 98).

It is not a coincidence that these terms arose in India at a time when the country was engaging in a self-conscious comparison of its own art forms with those originating in Europe – a comparison forced on the inhabitants of India through the unequal power relations of the colonial encounter. These conditions led some influential voices within India to call for a restructuring of cultural practices to better represent their ideal of India, and to argue for the value of their own art forms in comparison to those of the West. In response to the ideological pressures of colonialism and in the context of the Indian independence movement, the performing arts in India were subject to calls for the styles to be standardized, for repertoires to be established, and for the practices to represent an idealized, spiritualized image of India (Subramanian 1999; Allen 2008). Indeed, this is the period in which Karnatak music could be said to have adopted an "imaginary museum of musical works" (Goehr 1992) – canonizing the compositions of three 18th-century composers who became viewed as saints and are commonly referred to as "the Trinity" (*Trimurti*). However, although one might argue that a "work-concept" developed in Karnatak music in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, there are significant differences between this canonization of musical works and that found in Western art music. In the case of Karnatak music, there is no confusion between notation and the work; there was no shift, as described by Gavin Steingo in the context of Western art music, from performance being supported by a score, to the score being supported by performance (2014: 85). As will be explained in the following sections, in Karnatak music practices, notation acts primarily as a prompt for memory and the realization of compositions varies across performer lineages and even individual performers.

3 "Improvisation" and "Composition" in Karnatak Music: The "Othering" of Improvisation

In order to understand how unsuitable the terms "improvisation" and "composition" are for differentiating Karnatak music formats it is necessary to know a little about how the various formats are learnt and performed in this style. "Compositions" are taught orally/aurally – with some supporting notation being handwritten, either by the teacher from memory, or by the student in response to the teacher's demonstration (Pearson, forthcoming). At first, the aim for students is to precisely emulate their teacher's rendition of the composition, but as students progress and become more independent from their teacher, they are free to add their own interpretations; for example, they might vary the melodic lines slightly or even add extra variations (the "theme and variation" structure is common in Karnatak compositions). As a result, performances of the same composition can differ significantly from musician to musician, and even between different performances by the same musician, with only the song lyrics remaining precisely the same.

Meanwhile, performances of *manodharma* formats, widely referred to by English-speakers as forms of "improvisation," must include stock phrases (often referred to as *prayogas* or "characteristic phrases") and motifs that are essential to the proper expression of the *rāga* (melodic entity). These characteristic phrases are assimilated during the learning process, learnt not by rote but rather implicitly – through listening and imitating. Such phrases are, effectively, pre-composed and fixed to a large extent. However, performers have freedoms regarding how to put the phrases together, and are also free to pull them apart and play with the elements – the shorter motifs and

notes within the phrases. They may then develop and play with these shorter motifs as they like, as long as the grammatical rules of the *rāga* are not broken in the process.

So in the ways described above, all formats in Karnatak music – whether typically considered as improvisation or composition – simultaneously include pre-existing elements as well as freedoms for the performer. In light of this, grouping some formats into the category "composition" and others into "improvisation" makes little sense. However, the "sense" behind these categories can be understood if one considers their socio-historical contexts. As Laudan Nooshin argues, oppositional thinking, such as that seen in the composition-improvisation divide, arises through certain pressures, which, being societal, are also ideological and political in nature (2003: 243). As explained above, the term *manodharma*, and the categories of improvisation and composition, were adopted in the context of the colonization of India and in the midst of the highly unequal power relationship imposed on the country. Nooshin, writing on the related case of Iranian music during the 20th century, argues that the conceptual opposition of improvisation and composition was a tool for the continued "othering" of the East: an Orientalist attitude that found it comfortable and convenient to essentialize the music of "the East" as "improvised" in opposition to the "composed" music of "the West." Because the notion of improvisation in this othering was associated with the non-rational and non-cerebral, Nooshin argues that the "improvisation" of the East could, therefore, be excluded from the category of "real art," which should be cerebral and notated (2003: 245–8). From the 1960s onwards, a switch occurred as improvisation became more frequently valorized, due to its positive associations with personal freedom, naturalness and spontaneity – but even as improvisation was valorized, the imaginary dichotomy with composition was maintained (250). Nooshin notes that in both cases "the continued oppositional paradigm between improvisation and composition was partly rooted in a perceived need to perpetuate difference and in particular for European art music to maintain its 'others'" (251).

Thus, the music improvisation-composition opposition must be viewed as a product of discourse – emerging from ideology and societal power relations both within European contexts and across cultures. Nevertheless, it is reasonable to ask whether there is anything meaningful within the concepts of music improvisation and composition, despite their opposition being largely a product of various "otherings." How do the qualities ascribed to diverse forms of "improvisation" compare across cultures, and are the creative processes involved similar? In the next section I will explore these questions, with examples from jazz, free improvisation and Karnatak music.

4 Qualities Ascribed to "Improvisation" Across Cultures

In jazz and free improvisation contexts, qualities typically associated with improvisation include spontaneity, risk, novelty, freedom, disruption and egalitarianism.[4] For many musicians and commentators in the Global North (Europe, North America, Australia, etc.), these qualities have become associated with music improvisation to the point that improvisation without such qualities might seem impossible – and if possible, then perhaps viewed as inferior or unethical.[5] However, in Karnatak music and elsewhere around the world, there are formats that are routinely referred to by English-speakers as "improvised," where qualities such as novelty and freedom are not prominent in local discourses on the style. For example, in Karnatak concert reviews and newspaper articles on musicians there is rarely any mention of such traits. Instead, qualities such as knowledge, tradition and mastery are among those more typically highlighted. How can both styles be "improvised" when the qualities ascribed to each appear to be distinct – one emphasizing freedom and spontaneity, and the other tradition and knowledge? I suggest the answer lies in the fact that such characteristics are elements of discourse, and are thus in flux both within and across cultures. If we look more closely, we can see that all of the (sometimes opposing) qualities mentioned above are present in Karnatak music, as well as in jazz and free improvisation.

4.1 Spontaneity and Preparation

The quality of spontaneity, typically valorized in discourse on free improvisation and jazz performance, is also central to one of the dictionary definitions of the word "improvisation." Meaning "without preparation," the term "improvisation" is poorly attributed to any musical practice. Performers of styles considered to be "improvised" spend many years listening to and imitating other performers, learning the idiom and practicing for fluency, before being able to perform professionally. They then spend the rest of their lives working further, refining their understanding and skills. From accounts given by jazz musicians (Berliner 1994: 21–58), this appears to be the case in jazz as much as it is in Karnatak music. In the latter, students spend many years listening to renowned musicians, imitating them and memorizing compositions. As a result, performers gradually assimilate the building blocks of the style – the characteristic phrases and motifs that are required to convey the mood of individual *rāgas*. In jazz, the learning process is similarly lengthy and demanding, requiring years of imitation, sometimes including deliberate memorization, until fluency in the idiom is acquired. Paul Berliner argues that "Just as children learn to speak their native language by imitating older competent speakers, so young musicians learn to speak jazz by imitating seasoned improvisers" (1994: 95). Basing his argument on numerous statements from jazz musicians, he summarizes as follows:

> Many students begin acquiring an expansive collection of improvisational building blocks by extracting those shapes they perceive as discrete components from the larger solos they have already mastered and practicing them as independent figures. They acquire others selectively by studying numerous performances of their idols.
>
> *(Berliner 1994: 101)*

In this way, the learning process for jazz performers appears similar to that for Karnatak musicians, who also learn "improvisational building blocks" by listening to and imitating others, as well as from memorized compositions. Although the building blocks used by jazz musicians are likely to change over time as their styles develop, the fact of their existence is attested to by analyses of skilled improvisers' performances. For example, Thomas Owens (1974: viii) presents details of Charlie Parker's use of around 100 "principal motifs," and Stefan Love (2012) examines schemata (recurring patterns) in Parker's performances.

Even in free improvisation, a style that emerged in rejection of many existing musical norms, there is a process of amassing musical devices and processes that become characteristic of the individual performer's style. Indeed, without the presence of such devices and processes, how could any performer be said to have a "style"? Free improvisers typically draw on a range of extended instrumental techniques, non-tonal musical gestures (perhaps exploring timbre or physical movement) and ways of developing such techniques and gestures over time. Derek Bailey famously argued that free improvisation is "non-idiomatic" (1993: xi–xii), a characterization that has since been countered. For example, George Lewis notes that based on the details of Bailey's argument, "it may be difficult to see how free improvisation avoids becoming an idiom like all the others out there" (2004: 22). Interestingly, in an interview with Henry Kaiser (1975), Bailey himself explained that he employed a self-devised stock of patterns and processes:

> But some things, I know what's going on all the time. They're patterns really. I may as well be playing licks. But they're useful in that they form the basis of the language and you can get some impetus going from them. You can keep the thing moving along like that.
>
> *(Kaiser 1975; Lash 2011: 153)*

Bailey was amongst those who developed the idiom of free improvisation, which is perhaps why, at the time, he felt that he played outside of any idiom. This particular idiom is based on a negation of elements commonly found in other styles: for example, avoiding tonality (a hierarchy of pitch relations), and performing without a regular pulse or meter. In addition, performers might use a number of "devices," which in some ways are comparable to the "characteristic phrases" and compositional techniques of Karnatak music, providing building blocks that can be played with and processes for developing them. In the following, Bailey describes a few of such process-based and gestural "devices" that he used at the time:

> A device I use sometimes is to play something quite nothing – sloppy would be a good word – then try to figure out what it was. So then you slow it down a bit and try to look at what it would have sounded like if you had played it properly. […] A little trick I've been working on lately is sliding the pick on the side of the string, which can produce a high scream. It may not work at all, and the pitch is totally unpredictable.
>
> *(Kaiser 1975)*

Bailey lists several more devices in the first edition of *Improvisation (1980)*:

> A list of the types of measures which proved successful would include: combining pitch with non-pitch ("preparing" it but not using a fixed preparation), constructing intervals from mixed timbres, a greater use of ambiguous pitch (e.g. the less "pure" harmonics—7th onwards), compound intervals, moving pitch (which includes glisses and microtonal adjustments), coupling single notes with a "distant" harmonic, horizontally an attempt to play an even mix of timbres, unison pitches with mixed timbres—elements of this kind, and many others, proved useful.
>
> *(Bailey 1980: 128)*

Through such performer accounts, we can understand that free improvisation, like Karnatak music and jazz, employs something akin to characteristic motifs (musical gestures) and processes for developing them. Although spontaneity is involved in bringing together and elaborating on such building blocks, years of preparation and practice are required in order to develop and achieve fluency in the pre-existing material and processes.

Having discussed the significance of preparation across all three styles, I now consider its putative opposite: spontaneity. While spontaneity features heavily in discourse on jazz and free improvisation, it is less commonly discussed in Karnatak music, where musicians are more typically praised for their knowledge of *rāga* and adherence to tradition. However, when learning to play the style and when speaking with musicians, it becomes clear that performers of this style also value spontaneity and "creation in the moment." The Karnatak flautist and musicologist T. Viswanathan describes the performance of *rāga ālāpana* (a *manodharma* format) as a balancing "the elements of spontaneity and planning" (1977: 70). In the following, he describes the process from a performer's perspective:

> He [the performer] combines the various phrases, inflections and expressive styles he has learned, sometimes changing them very little, at other times creating a new synthesis. Occasionally he will also be able to produce phrases and twists of melodic imagination spontaneously. Such material may have not been sung before, but must nevertheless conform to the traditional aesthetic rules of the rāga.
>
> *(1977: 52)*

A similar combination of prepared (pre-existing) and spontaneous aspects can be seen in the following description given by the Karnatak vocalist and mathematician Srividhya Balaji, who characterizes her experience of singing *rāga ālāpana* as a process of emergence:

> While improvising, what encourages me to start the alapana with a certain phrase of a raaga is highly dependent on my knowledge base in the raaga and what I am feeling at that given moment, in that specific context. Once the first phrase has been sung, either the aesthetics, emotionality or logical patterning of this phrase informs what the second phrase would be in the sequence. This phrase now affects the third phrase similarly, and so on. The sequencing of these phrases is emergent on the spot.
>
> *(Balaji 2019: 405)*

In summary, the testimony of musicians makes it clear that both spontaneity and preparation are present and important in all three styles discussed here, notwithstanding the different emphases in discourses associated with each style.

4.2 Novelty

Novelty is clearly prized in jazz performance. The ability to avoid playing the same thing twice can even be seen as an indicator of greatness. For example, the trumpeter Doc Cheatham asserts:

> If you went to hear trumpet players like Louis Armstrong, for instance, they would play any tune like "Chinatown," and they'd play fifteen or thirty different choruses, and they would never repeat the same thing. They had so much talent. Every time they'd play a tune, the solo would be different.
>
> *(Berliner 1994: 268)*

Similarly, speaking of his own practice, the jazz trumpeter Red Rodney explains that he tries to create all the time – even though he may not always succeed, and adds, "but when I do, and I surprise myself, that's when I'm happiest" (Berliner 1994: 268). Again, it is the novelty in particular that is valued and enjoyed.

Although novelty is not heavily emphasized in Karnatak music discourse, senior artists are often lauded by more junior musicians for their ability to produce something new within the traditional framework. For example, Hemmige V. Srivatsan writes of his teacher, the esteemed vocalist K.V. Narayanaswamy:

> On stage, KVN [K.V. Narayanaswamy] constantly explores new vistas, all the while staying within the classical realm. He sings even the same kriti [composition] slightly differently from one concert to the next – for example, by adding new saṇgati [phrases]. Once, he sang Swati Tirunal's *Kripaya palaya saurey* (Charukesi) as the main piece three days in a row, but each rendition was different from the other two.
>
> *(Srivatsan, n.d.)*

Furthermore, it is clear that skilled Karnatak musicians enjoy finding something different, something new, during their explorations of *rāga*. My own teacher, the violinist T.V. Ramanujacharlu, explained during an interview that he sometimes aims to avoid "fixed *saṅgatis*" – meaning the stock characteristic phrases. To achieve this goal, he plays with phrases in various ways, deconstructing them into their constituent motifs, dwelling on certain elements and dragging them out, and interrupting the completion of a phrase with another element (personal interview,

Srirangam, 16 August 2014). While performing *rāga ālāpana*, he often appears to be searching in amongst the phrases for something of interest, something different or intriguing; and when he finds it, he might visibly enjoy the discovery. Thus, although tradition rather than novelty is typically emphasized in Karnatak music discourse, the latter is also important to Karnatak musicians, much as for jazz musicians.

4.3 Freedom versus Tradition

Considering the title of the genre, it is unsurprising that the quality of freedom is heavily emphasized in discourses on free improvisation. However, it is equally clear that freedoms in this style are not without limit. Free improvisation practitioners typically avoid tonality, and instead favor non-hierarchical pitch relationships, or even non-pitch-based timbral exploration. In addition, stable pulses and metrical structures are frequently avoided. Such idiomatic tendencies must be considered not only a freedom from certain structures, but also a restriction to not employ those structures. Melvin Backstrom (2013: 2) notes,

> what has often struck me about so-called "free improvisation" is how un-free its performers often are in limiting themselves to only a small portion – that of the most abstract, rhythmically irregular, and non-tonal – of the total sonic possibilities available for musical instantiation.

Free improvisation is essentially defined by that from which it is free – a negation of previous styles. It is, therefore, defined in the context of, and as positioned against, certain aspects of preceding traditions.[6] Thus, free improvisation must be considered equally defined by its traditions as by its many freedoms.

Jazz performance, meanwhile, draws even more clearly on its traditions. Berliner (1994) emphasizes the extent to which young performers tend to imitate their idols, even sometimes memorizing solos from recordings, before eventually forging their own styles (95–119). Similarly in Karnatak music, students idolize and closely imitate their teachers for many years, before later developing their own performance styles. Both jazz and Karnatak music, however, have freedoms in addition to their traditions. In both styles, performers are free to play with the pre-existing building blocks of these styles, and even create their own motifs and phrases as long as they conform to the norms of the style.

Through the comparisons above, it can be seen that differences apparent at the level of discourse in the three styles fail to persist in practice. All three musical practices involve all of the qualities discussed – spontaneity, preparation, novelty, freedom and tradition. I suggest, therefore, that the differences apparent in discourse are likely to emerge from ideologies relating to their particular socio-historical contexts. Furthermore, the presence in all three styles of all commonly attributed qualities as well as their notional opposites demonstrates that such qualities are largely irrelevant in identifying whether something might be "improvised" or not. In addition, as argued by Cook (2004), qualities of spontaneity and freedom are significant also in the performance of composed works.

Thus, we arrive at an impasse; the concepts of music improvisation and composition are contingent on specific social and historical contexts, in performance practice there is no clear opposition between the two supposedly opposing forms, and there are significant problems with conceptualizing improvisation in terms of commonly associated qualities such as spontaneity and freedom. It is tempting to argue that the concept of "music improvisation" is corrupt to the extent that it cannot be meaningfully used.

In order to progress from this impasse, based on the above examination of processes and structures within musical practices, I propose an alternative way of conceptualizing music-making,

founded on qualities of fixity and play that exist concurrently and at every level, and in which play is dependent on fixed elements.

5 An Alternative Approach: Fixity and Play in Musical Practices

As argued above, when defined as "spontaneous creativity," improvisation can be said to occur in all music-making, while pre-composed and otherwise pre-existing elements are also present in all musical styles. As both aspects (the spontaneous and the pre-existing) exist in all music-making, it would be sensible to develop an account that builds on this observation. I suggest that music-making can fruitfully be considered as combining that which is *fixed* (pre-existing) and that which is *in play* (affording leeway for the performer) where both exist simultaneously and at different levels in any given format. The two aspects can be thought of as threads that intertwine, running together throughout the performance. That which is *fixed* affords recognition – for example, recognition of the composition or the *rāga* – and that which is *in play* affords creativity: latitude for the performer.

The concept of play employed here draws on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer, who characterizes art as play, in which the observer becomes part of that play. Gadamer notes,

> we find talk of the play of light, the play of the waves, the play of gears or parts of machinery, the interplay of limbs, the play of forces, the play of gnats, even a play on words. In each case what is intended is to-and-from movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end.
>
> *(Gadamer 1989: 104)*

I find the sense of play expressed in the phrase "the play of gears" to be particularly evocative. In mechanical engineering, such play is referred to using the term "backlash," as in the following definition: "backlash, sometimes called lash or play, is clearance or lost motion in a mechanism caused by gaps between the parts" (Wang et al. 2015: 99). Thus, the parts of a mechanism are the fixed elements and play results from spaces between these elements. In engineering terms, this results in "lost motion"; in practice, it results in a degree of free motion between the parts – some looseness between elements of the machine. Translating this to music-making, we can imagine a structure in which there is space between interlocking elements, affording "play" within the system.

More generally, play is always the movement of something against something else – as in the play of light on water, or of gears against each other. It is an interaction between connected objects that produces free movement in a limited range. One of the common dictionary definitions of play is "to move or operate freely within a bounded space."[7]

In order for play to occur, there must also be something that is fixed or bounded – there must be a system in order for there to be play in the system. In my conceptualization of these notions as applied to music, the "fixed" aspect of the play-fixity binary is fixed *only* to the extent that it is recognizable; it is fixed in the sense of being established, such as a norm, rather than in the sense of being unchangeable over time. In music, the "fixed" elements – the recognizable musical objects such as phrases, motifs, gestures, structures and compositional processes – also have movement within them; for example, there is also play between the notes and articulations that make up a motif. Therefore, in applying these notions to music, I propose that the qualities of fixity and play exist simultaneously and at every level. Play can occur both within and between notes, motifs and phrases and elements of structural schemata, and can involve, for example, freedoms in articulation and emphasis, as well as in dynamics and timbre. Between and within every conceptually fixed or established element of a musical style there is the potential for play, which may or may not typically be realized in that style.

In this model of music-making, it is not possible to differentiate entire styles by the degree or extent of play because it may exist at different levels in the various musical formats of any given style. For example, in Karnatak *rāga ālāpana* (elaboration on *rāga*), there is a high degree of play in the ordering of characteristic phrases and motifs – more than is typically found in Western art music compositions. However, the fixity within the motifs that make up the stock phrases in Karnatak music can be greater than those found in Western art music composition. In order for a Karnatak motif to correctly express a *rāga*, the emphases and de-emphases (accents and dynamics) must be placed precisely according to tradition, otherwise the *rāga* may not be recognizable. Meanwhile, in Western art music, a phrase or motif from a well-known composition would still be recognized as such even if the emphases within it were altered.

An important feature of the fixed aspects of these imaginary mechanisms is that they are fixed to the extent that they are recognizable. For example, in Karnatak music, characteristic phrases are fixed to the extent that they can be recognized as belonging to a particular *rāga* – so that they convey the character of the *rāga*, which is a primary goal of performance in this style. However, the elements of such phrases are not completely immovable – some play within the phrases does exist. Each *rāga* can be recognized by knowledgeable listeners through its characteristic phrases, motifs and the particular "feel" created when the performer follows the grammatical rules of the *rāga* and norms of the style. Similarly, in Western art music, a composition is fixed to the extent that it can be recognized as that composition by experienced listeners and musicians. Recognition and the experience of familiarity are of great importance in our interactions with music – they are part of what makes music pleasurable (and can also play a role in displeasure). Familiarity is central to experiences of anticipation and expectation; in order to expect that something will occur during a phrase or a process, we must be familiar with it. Numerous music psychology studies have argued for the significance of expectation in musical pleasure, with both the fulfillment and violation of expectation having the potential for being pleasurable, depending on the context (Huron 2006; Gebauer et al. 2012). Hearing a familiar and beautifully performed characteristic phrase in Karnatak music and knowing where it is likely to be heading is part of the pleasure of the style; this is similarly true in Western art music. Recognition is the means by which we orient ourselves within a musical space.

Furthermore, it is the fixed (established) and therefore recognizable aspects of a musical genre that can become part of the canon of that style, in the sense that they are idealized (considered to be perfect), revered for their qualities, and come to represent the style. In Western art music, it is the compositions that have been canonized and that are approached with great reverence. In Karnatak music, the early 20th century saw the canonization of a few composers and their compositions. These now act as ideals within the style and have come to represent it to some extent. However, we might also consider the status of *rāgas*. These are also idealized and treated with great reverence; they are considered to have individual identities and, as a group, they can be taken to represent that which is valuable in the style.

Could *rāgas*, therefore, also be considered as "musical works"? Goehr mentions "the Indian raga" in passing, referring to it as lying further from "romantic music" and the work-concept than "the eighteenth century sonata" (1989: 61). In some respects, it is clear that *rāgas* do not match commonly held notions of musical works – they are not the creation of one person, they are not notated from start to end, and they are, in some ways, relatively dissimilar across performances. However, I would argue nevertheless that *rāgas* do conform to several aspects of the work concept. *Rāgas* are considered to each have an individual character or mood that is revealed in performance; successful performances must include the *rāga*'s characteristic phrases and motifs, and any other phrases performed must follow the rules of the particular *rāga*: its grammar. In this sense, *rāgas* have a discreteness to them; they are musical objects that can be repeated. One might say, for example, "the vocalist last night sung Kalyani" – Kalyani being the name of a specific *rāga*. A *rāga* can be described as portable:[8] it is a musical object that may be performed by different musicians.

Furthermore, like other musical works, *rāgas* are eulogized and idealized. For example, the renowned vocalist R. Vedavalli writes of a *rāga* named Todi: "for centuries, Todi has captivated the souls and imagination of generations of musicians and composers by its sheer ocean-like depth and vastness" (Vedavalli 2012). Although not all *rāgas* are eulogized to this extent, all *rāgas* are considered to be perfect in themselves: each has an internal coherence, a character that is complete in itself.

Within the Karnatak style, the proper performance of *rāga ālāpana* has become a marker for "classicism" in a way that simply playing compositions without *rāga ālāpana* is not. The musicologist Harold Powers argues that "the '*rāga*-concept' is the central regulative concept in Indian classical music, like the work concept for European classical music," but concludes, however, that "a *rāga* is not a work" (Powers 1996: 20). I suggest it is unlikely that *rāgas* could ever be entirely accepted as "works," considering that the concept of the musical work was originally defined solely in terms of Western art music. More importantly for the arguments made in this chapter, whether or not *rāgas* are considered to be "musical works," they do function as such in certain respects. They are discrete musical objects, considered to have individual characters that are perfect in themselves, and thus are canonized in the style – they are able to represent the style. All of this relies on their quality of "fixity," their ability to be recognized, despite the scope for play when they are performed.

In order to illuminate further how these elements of fixity, play and recognition interact in musical practice I will elaborate in more detail how they apply in two Karnatak music formats: compositions and *rāga ālāpana*.

5.1 Fixity and Play in Karnatak Compositions

Certain elements in the Karnatak style can be described as fixed in the sense that they are either learnt or assimilated as units, and are thus recognizable by musicians and knowledgeable listeners. Examples of such fixed and recognizable elements include the characteristic phrases of *rāgas*, and sections of *kritis* (a form of song composition). While compositions such as *kritis* are fixed to the extent they are recognizable, it is worth considering what in particular makes them so – what is fixed and what is in play in this format.

The primary fixed element in a *kriti* is its lyrics (*sāhitya*). These tend to be approached with a reverence similar to that accorded "the work" in Western art music, and may not be altered by performers. However, the melodies of *kritis* can vary substantially from performance to performance – there is "play" in the melodic line. At the same time, fixity exists *within* motifs and phrases that comprise the melodic lines of compositions, to the extent that the motifs and phrases should be characteristic of the *rāga*. This means that they should either be among the stock characteristic phrases, or otherwise conform to the *rāga* grammar.

Details of a *kriti's* melody, as it was learnt from one's teacher, can be changed by a musician either in advance or alternatively in the moment of the performance. As a result, any given *kriti* (or other form of composition) will be rendered in notably different ways by different performers. If then notated as a memory aid, the different versions of a composition will be rendered differently on the page. It is important to note that the solmization-based notation in Karnatak music is used only as an aid for memory and, furthermore, it is never used in public performance. The notation represents the basic notes (*svaras*) and their approximate durations, but does not include details of the ornaments performed on and between the notes and, therefore, does not provide detailed rhythmic or pitch information, or indeed details on emphasis and dynamics. In order to decode such notation, the musician must know which ornaments (*gamakas*) can be placed on each basic note (*svara*), and this is dependent on the *rāga* and immediate melodic context (Pearson 2016a). In this way, the notation is not so much the "script" as it is a prompt for the actual script, which is held in one's memory. Thus, fixity in this style arises not from notation, but rather from memory.

5.2 Fixity and Play in Rāga Ālāpana

The *manodharma* form, *rāga ālāpana* is a musical format without any underlying meter in which the soloist draws and elaborates on phrases and motifs that are characteristic of the particular *rāga* being performed. These phrases and motifs are assimilated during the learning process, acquired from compositions and the *ālāpana* performances of teachers and other performers. In *rāga ālāpana*, these characteristic phrases and motifs can be considered the "fixed" element. They should be performed precisely according to tradition in order to convey the mood or character of the *rāga* – which is the goal of *rāga ālāpana* performance.

In addition there are a plethora of rules that might be said to act as fixed points or boundaries, but within which there is play. These rules concern (a) the overall structure of the *ālāpana* (for example, the typical way of moving from lower to higher octaves and back again), (b) which ornaments can be played on a note (*svara*) in a given melodic context and (c) additional norms applied when the performer is not playing stock characteristic phrases: for example, regarding which note can be used to start and end a phrase, and the permitted order of notes within phrases. Taken together, these rules can be considered the fixed points within a performance. Nevertheless, there is still much that is "in play" for the performer. Musicians can play with the characteristic phrases to an extent, deconstructing them into smaller sections, perhaps repeating or dwelling on some parts. Performers use compositional techniques, such as delaying resolution of longer characteristic phrases by inserting other elements before the ending. Performers might also "play" with individual pitches or groups of pitches permitted in the *rāga* that are not characteristic phrases, working through different permutations of a few notes, repeating musical ideas but with small changes, additions and extensions. Such play is indeed one of the goals of *rāga ālāpana* performance, and is admired as long as it adheres to the rules and norms of the style.

Thus, in *rāga ālāpana* there are fixed points – phrases, motifs and rules/norms – but the performer is free to play in amongst these, to explore the loose areas within and around this fixity. When we speak of the "play" in a system or a machine, we refer to the free movement between otherwise fixed or established elements. An analogous exploration of the latitude between that which is fixed is the specialty of the skilled Karnatak musician. Performers demonstrate their knowledge of the rules and characteristic phrases of *rāgas*, and even of the history of the style – sometimes weaving in idiosyncratic features from the performances of great musicians from previous generations. These are the traditional elements of the style. Meanwhile, performers display their creativity and aim to affect the audience by playing within these confines, exploring free movement within the system. All of this usually occurs without any interest in breaking the system, although some skilled performers do push the performance to a type of breaking point, creating deliberate ambiguity with regards to which *rāga* is being played, before returning to clarity.

6 Finale: Improvisation in Everyday Life

Having developed a concept of music making as involving interweaving threads of fixity and play, with the goal of moving beyond the problematic notion of "music improvisation," I am left, consequently, with the sense that there might be something of value in the notion of "improvisation" in music. Here I do not refer to improvisation as a category of music-making, which I argue is moribund, but rather, I suggest there is value in the notion of improvisation as a quality in music making, something that occurs in all styles and formats. This concept of improvisation draws on my exploration of fixity and play in musical practices, and can be defined as "play within and between pre-existing elements, with some goal in mind."

The rationale behind this concept is as follows. Based on discussions in this chapter of what musicians do in performance, we can see that all three styles of music discussed – Karnatak, jazz

and free improvisation – draw on relatively short, pre-existing phrases and musical gestures, remembered by the performer. Musicians are free to arrange, develop and play with these phrases as they see fit within the rules and traditions of the musical format and style. This is all done with a number of goals in mind – for example, of affecting others who are present (the audience or dancers), demonstrating skill, engineering a playful interaction with a co-performer, discovering something new in one's own performance and simply for the pleasure of playing. To put it more concisely, based on these styles at least, it appears that music "improvisation" can be accurately conceptualized as a process of bringing together and playing with pre-existing elements, with any number of goals in mind. Notably, this definition also works for the improvisation that occurs when someone "composes" a musical work prior to its performance. Furthermore, the definition of improvisation as "play within and between pre-existing elements" is also applicable to the improvisation that occurs when a musician performs a "composed" work. Conceptualized in this way, "music improvisation" can be freed from the confusing and misleading tangle of associated qualities (spontaneity, freedom), political and ethical positions (egalitarianism) and deliberations on degrees of difference and sameness across performances.

Considering music improvisation in this way also opens an avenue for comparing such musical practices with improvisation in everyday life. Here I refer to the improvisations that take place when we, for example, converse with others, or attempt to fix something that is broken. In his work on conversation as improvisation, Keith Sawyer notes, "in the many everyday situations where no script is specified—dinner conversation, small talk waiting for the bus, gossip in the company cafeteria—most of us can rise to the occasion and engage in emergent, improvised behavior" (2000: 184). He explains that everyday conversation draws on pre-existing structures:

> When the barber says, "How's all the family?" no one would claim that he's being creative. These aren't really his own words, since thousands of people have said exactly that line in exactly that situation before. Like the barber, we often use catchphrases in conversation – phrases like "Could I talk to you for a minute?" or "Give me a break." Because a million people have said exactly the same sentence, we could think of these sentences as scripted lines. Linguists call these little bits of script *formulaic speech*. But using formulaic speech still requires improvisational creativity; a catchphrase can send many different implicit messages, depending on the situation.
>
> *(Sawyer 2006: 155)*

Sawyer (2000, 2006) compares such creative use of formulaic speech in conversation to the use of pre-existing structures in jazz performance. In daily life, however, there is much beyond conversation that can similarly be considered improvisation, such as our everyday interactions with objects and people, and fixing things that are not working as they should. Such activities also draw on pre-existing structures (ways we have managed similar repairs and interactions before, or seen others do), which we bring together and adapt in the hope of achieving a desired effect. Philip Agre, in his work on the dynamic structure of everyday life, argues that "contingency is a central feature of the world of everyday activity and improvisation is the principal means by which people get along in the world" (1988: 1):

> Everyday activity, however routine, is not a matter of mechanically following a plan. You might or might not have plans and signs and shopping lists to help you carry on your daily activities, but in any event you must continually redecide what to do. Everyday activity is, in this sense, fundamentally improvisatory.
>
> *(Agre 1988: 41)*

Amongst the dynamic phenomena addressed in Agre's analysis are "the accumulation of responses." I suggest these are analogous to the pre-existing musical structures that I have discussed in this chapter, with which improvising musicians and composers play. Agre (1988: 41) defines these "accumulated responses" as follows: "When you do something repeatedly, you accumulate a repertoire of methods for dealing with the opportunities and contingencies it tends to present. Individually these methods are useful for saving the trouble of figuring them out again."

Following this line of thought, in daily life, our interactions typically involve improvising, based on a repertoire of accumulated potential responses. Whether we are conversing, fixing something or improvising music we use a limited range of materials (for example, pre-existing chunks of music and speech, processes for developing musical gestures or methods of dealing with repairs) to obtain a desired outcome. In all these cases, there is no full script for how to proceed, only chunks of pre-existing material and approaches. The "performer" has freedom regarding how they arrange and develop the pre-existing materials, dependent on their particular goals and skills.

Thus, I suggest that the narrow concept of music improvisation presented above, defined as "play within and between remembered pre-existing material," is highly relevant even beyond musical contexts. This apparently narrow concept emerges as being extremely broad, applicable also to improvisation in everyday life. This conceptualization emerges from the notions of fixity and play developed in this chapter; *fixed* elements – the repertoire of accumulated responses – are brought together with some goals in mind, and the *play* in the system is that of latitude afforded to the individual in using or performing these elements.

Through the ideas developed in this chapter, I have aimed to form an understanding of both music and everyday improvisation that is based on observation of practice, rather than being pre-determined by uncritically assumed conceptual configurations. By taking such an approach, I suggest that it becomes possible to move beyond essentializing tendencies, where elements of discourse relating only to specific practices and socio-historical contexts are treated as though they have universal relevance. This is important not only for the sake of accuracy, but also to end the stereotyping of musics from non-European backgrounds, which often subjects them to categorizations based on "otherings" founded on colonial mindsets. In my quest to find a better way to conceptualize music typically defined as "improvised," I thus propose a rejection of improvised music as a category, and a shift towards considering improvisation as existing in all music, where it can usefully be considered as play within and between pre-existing material. As in everyday improvisation, the fixed elements in music are not entirely unchangeable, but rather they develop over time. They are fixed only to the extent of being recognizable as a norm at that time and place, and as a viable response to a given situation. By emphasizing the centrality of pre-existing material in all music making, I mean to highlight also the similarities between improvisation in music contexts and everyday improvisation. In both cases, the combination of fixity and play in improvisation affords effective interaction between people, comprehensible to those involved. This play within and between pre-existing material is, thus, fundamental to success in all of our interactions, whether musical or otherwise.

Notes

1 As Nooshin (2003: 256) argues, "the perennial question of whether a piece of music is 'really' improvised becomes somewhat immaterial, since 'improvisational' and 'compositional' elements can be found in all music."

2 This is a form of music making with which I have been involved since learning to play Karnatak violin and *mridangam* in South India (2007–11), leading me to conduct research on its pedagogic and performance practices (Pearson 2016a, 2016b).

3 Due to the colonization of India by the British and the imposition of the English language, such English language terms are now used by some in India, and have certainly had an impact on the conceptualization of music in India.

4 See for example Borgo (2002), where such qualities are emphasized. Meanwhile, Berliner (1994: 1 f.) critiques the tendency for "spontaneity" to be emphasized in discourse on jazz, and Goldman (2016) identifies an inappropriate emphasis on qualities such as spontaneity, freedom and novelty in music psychology studies on improvisation.
5 Regarding the inferiority and ethical implications of prepared elements, the jazz trumpeter John McNeil explains, if

> I were to try to play mechanically, playing things I've worked out before, it might make me sound real good, but it would also make me feel guilty – as if I haven't really done anything good. I'd prefer to make things up as I go along.
>
> (Berliner 1994: 268)

6 See Lewis 2004: 22 f. and Backstrom 2013.
7 See https://www.thefreedictionary.com/play (accessed October 26, 2020).
8 See Butt (2005: 29) and Hamilton (2020: 291) on portability as a feature of musical works.

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32

IMPROVISATION IN ARAB MUSICAL PRACTICES

A. J. Racy

In the Arab world, the phenomenon of musical improvisation is historically deep-rooted, widely practiced and, in general, aesthetically and culturally held in high esteem. This realm of artistry is associated with a certain technical skill and a particular emotional effect. As a craft, it is connected to an established set of theoretical concepts and structural frameworks, but it also appeals to the performer's spontaneity and intuition. Ideally, improvising develops through knowledge and experience, as well as talent and inspiration.

1 Nomenclature

With this general profile in mind, we may assess the use of the word "improvisation," and by extension some of its translations in other world languages. Closely considered, the term poses certain conceptual complications. Generally, the expression may embrace a shade of imperfection or inadequate preparation. The given English synonyms, for example, range from "extemporizing," "impromptu" and "spontaneous" to "ad-lib," "make do" and "playing by ear."[1] In the eastern Arab world, the word "improvisation" has been translated, rather literally, into the classical Arabic concept of *irtijāl*, which, practically speaking, is outside the professional Arab musician's jargon. Actually, this term tends to elicit some aversion, as it carries the ambivalence suggested by the notion of "improvisation." However, this Arabic term is often heard in the context of poetry, for example in Lebanon, when a good *zajal* poet-singer (or *qawwāl*), creates a couple of lines (as traditional in proper meter and rhyme) "on the spot."[2]

In some ways, the literal term of "improvisation," as well as some of its equivalents, prompts certain ponderings. Such a polysemic coinage as "improvisation" carries multiple overtones, some of them being flattering or benign and others negative or suspicious. We may venture an expression that recalls or recaptures the musical phenomenon that we are actually addressing. One possible construct comes to mind, namely, "intuitive creation." This option, however, may have to include the context and the idiom, basically the "practice" and the "music." Such a construct, although applicable, seems wordy or cumbersome.

Meanwhile, some researchers, among them ethnomusicologists who are engaged in the "improvisation" discourse, have suggested identifying the musical phenomenon simply by the manner in which it is being created. Among the illustrations (with italics added) are: "In the history of musicology, improvisation – sometimes defined as *the creation of music in the course of performance* – has played a minor role" (Nettl 1998: 1), or "*creating music spontaneously* is usually appreciated as an art but also linked to a realm of meaning that extends beyond the immediate musical content"

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(Racy 2016: 230) or "Improvisation – in the broadest sense, *the practice of making compositional decisions in the moment of performance* – is part of virtually every musical tradition in the world" (Solis 2009: 1). Beginning with such elemental portrayals, we may revisit the term of "improvisation" as a workable expression. Initially, we recognize the practicality of this term, which readily lends itself to so many basic derivatives such as "to improvise," "improvising," "improviser," "improvisatory" and "improvisation." And practically, the term as generally used seems to cover a variety of improvisatory modalities and generic forms. Short of keeping the above derivatives all in quotes, we may rehabilitate the traditional usage by reconstituting its complexions, based upon our research findings. In a sense, we are inductively collecting our data toward forming our theories and conclusions.

2 Worldviews

In Arab and many other cultures, people take interest in musical improvisation for a variety of reasons. Many cherish the art for its significance and aesthetic gratification. Accordingly, improvisation in its various manifestations may transcend ordinary musical practice and challenge the established theoretical common expression (see Ghiselin 1952; Gerson-Kiwi 1970; Bailey 1992: ix). It may also embrace an extraordinary musical ability that represents the performer individually, thus displaying his or her own talent and distinctive ingenuity (see Chernoff 1979; Bailey 1992; Racy 2000).

Also typical in the Near Eastern Arab world, improvisation is usually associated with a physical and mental state of inspiration (*salṭanah*) that empowers the improviser to excel musically. That state instills musical ecstasy (*ṭarab*) in the audience, especially the diehard listeners (*sammī'ah*, singular *sammī'*, from the word *sama'* or "audition"). This latter concept carries spiritual, mystical and philosophical connotations (see Racy 2003: 120–46). Furthermore, as a traditional art form, the improvisatory practice tends to eloquently embrace or represent, the local musical aesthetic as epitomized by the modal system, or the *maqāmāt* (singular, *maqām*) (see Racy 2000: 305). Actually, improvisatory performances often take place in live and intimate gatherings. Keen listeners look forward to submerging themselves in the ecstatic experience and engaging directly in a creative audible or subtle feedback with the performer (Racy 1991, 1998, 2003).

Generally, these and related musical affinities are shown to align with a human disposition that favors free will, variegation, experimentation and learning through trial and error (see Nachmanovitch 1990; Hall 1992). Furthermore, the improvisational idiom, as experience, may resonate with spiritual transcendence, flow, "deep listening" and ecstatic transformation (see Csikszentmihaly 1990; Racy 2000: 309–14; Becker 2004). In context, however, such inclinations come to fruition through local cultural guidelines and the musicians' creative intuitions and insights. In this case, the musician, rather than recalling a premeditated or fixed structural form, intuitively produces traditional matter-of-course renditions reminiscent of a "habitus" (Bourdieu 1990: 55).

In a related vein, the creation or re-creation of certain models has its ideal arena in the art of storytelling. Actually, the self-contained rendition becomes a performance in its own right. When I was growing up in a small Lebanese village, I knew my father as a talented storyteller, who later became a well-known and prolific writer and poet. His own narratives, I suspect, have influenced my own skill as a musical improviser.[3] Briefly, in the Arab world, the prevalence of such performative practices may give credence to the notion that improvising is basically spontaneous, innate and, in a sense, natural.

3 Ingredients

It is common to speak of music in terms of a binary scheme that differentiates between the improvised and the "composed," or "precomposed." Such binarism exists in many world

traditions. Accordingly, "in the Middle East, improvisation has the high prestige associated with freedom and unpredictability, while in the West, precomposition has the prestige associated with discipline and predictability" (Nettl 1998: 8). In some traditions, however, the dual structure may not be all strict or diametrically oppositional. In the Arab Near East, for example in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt and other neighboring countries, the composed and the improvised domains, though they may exist separately, sometimes occur in the same musical works or genres. Furthermore, through a finer or micro-analytic lens, the two styles seem to share many musical components. Some researchers have noted that, on a certain level, the processes of improvising and composing are comparable and related (see Nettl 1974, 2009: xi–xii; Blum 2009: 239, 241). Two ethnomusicologists have conducted a pioneering case study on my own improvisations as a Lebanese musician. The co-authors, Bruno Nettl and Ronald Riddle, in two of their publications gave an account of several modal (*maqām*) instrumental performances. They identified the variable, or optional, features, or in a sense, the "improvised" material, but also brought to attention many reoccurring components such as brief rhythmical patterns, melodic sequences, thematic configurations and other building musical elements (see Nettl and Riddle 1973, 1998).[4]

To add, the "improvising" in improvisation and the "composing" in composition may be present in a matter of degree. Sometimes, the performance may seem ambivalent, or hybridized, especially when both styles merge or when the improviser quotes excessively from existing sources. Also to keep in mind, numerous Arab musical genres do not follow literal or concrete models. Instead, they usually derive from familiar and related musical outlines, sketches and skeletal outlines. I refer to these elements together as "musical-types," which may become fleshed out as actual and identifiable musical representations. The process entails a certain measure of flexibility and stylistic license.

4 Categories

The complexities presented above reflect the task of constructing an improvisatory typology. Since generic boundaries can be fluid and sometimes overlap, it is not always practical to speak of discrete analog terms. Some of the genres are known by name and are also recognized for their improvisatory potentials. In other cases, the musical expressions do not have standard names but, in practice, reveal a certain improvisatory component. Below I demonstrate some examples that together attest to the creativity and imagination within one of the basic facets of Arab music. My chosen items derive from the *ṭarab*-urban and regional-folk domains and from the earlier and current practice eras.

1 One example occurs when a musician interprets a usually precomposed and familiar musical work, but in the process spontaneously adds his or her own musical embellishments. The tools used may include certain ornaments, extending or shortening some notes, inserting certain pauses, introducing different rhythmic figures, displaying different timbral effects and many others. Such applications are meant to "beautify," or "enchant," without exaggerating or compromising the integrity of the original compositional work.

   The creative process, however, is basically improvised. It takes place without deliberate preparation or premeditation, and flows intuitively. Although it demonstrates genuine musical acumen, the phenomenon, or "the thing," is almost taken for granted as part of the performance. The practice, however, may have lost some of its luster given the emulation of specific sound recordings and the use of musical notation, as well as the recognition given to original composers. However, the practice continues to be heard on valuable sound recordings, as well as be experienced directly in live performances.

2 Another example takes place when a – typically small – ensemble of instrumentalists interprets a compositional work with each of the players filling in his or her own musical bits and pieces. Together, their coordinated contributions produce the full musical body. This approach, which suggests a certain division of labor, or a hocket-like technique, does not have a standard name in Arabic, although a few decades ago, the borrowed Western term of "heterophony" was suggested as a name.[5] Obviously, in this case, the mode of performing is collective rather than soloistic. The group applies a variety of techniques, such as dividing single notes among the different musicians, or coordinating the roles of the up and down beats, or the placing of some pauses. Also, the meter plays an important role. As we borrow another term, namely "heterorhythm," we would observe the occasional division of certain rhythmic patterns among the musicians, as well as the placing of some syncopations and rhythmic accentuations. Such distribution of roles occurs intuitively, as a second nature, especially for highly skilled performers.

This artform is typical of the early 20th-century Egyptian idiom. It was ideally suited for the *takht* ensemble, which was relatively small and consisted of instruments that are compatible in their melodic compasses, dynamics and ranges, but are distinctive in their timbres and modes of sound production. This ensemble, which played by itself or accompanied singers, used all or combinations of the following: the *'ūd* (the short-necked, fretless plucked lute); the *qānūn* (a Near Eastern plucked zither); the Western violin (with a different tuning and played with a local Arab technique [earlier being the Egyptian *rabābah*, namely a two-string upright spiked fiddle]) and the *nāy* (a reed flute). Also included was the *riqq* (a small frame drum with cymbals), which played with virtuosity and kept time for the group.

Historically, however, this aesthetic began to gradually recede in favor of other recent genres. In the 1930s and later on, the urban musical domain witnessed the prevalence of larger ensembles, or the *firqah* format, which used multiples of specific instruments, for example of violins and cellos and many Western-type instruments, as well as the familiar *takht* instruments. Similarly introduced were other textures such as unisons and octave layers. However, the improvisatory based heterophonic skill has been preserved in the Egyptian folk instrumental ensembles.

3 In this category I elaborate on the phenomenon of musical types (see above). I am presenting examples and their contents and also their improvisational dimensions. One such example is the music connected to the Lebanese *zajal*, namely, the sung folk poetry genre and its subgenres, each of which has its own melodic configurations and meters. Other examples include many typically strophic vocal constructs that fit the song-type profile. Some of them include the genre *shrūqī*, or *qaṣīd* (literally, "poetry"), which is traditionally performed by the *shā'ir* (poet-singer) in Arab Bedouin nomadic communities, today mostly settled in Syria, Jordan and the Arabian Peninsula. The theme of this genre is usually heroic or narrative-related, while another genre is the *'atābah*, which is emotion or love oriented. In both cases the performer, usually male, accompanies himself on the *rabābah* (a Bedouin single-string upright fiddle with skin-covered sound-box). However, in urban Arab areas, singers – male and in some cases female – perform these genres using the local urban intonations and with urban Arab musical instruments. Also to be included are some narrative expressions that are intoned and ritualistic and widely heard, such as the *adhān*, or the Islamic call to prayer. In this category, the creative process flows from potential pointers, such as musical contours, melodic themes, phrasing patterns, structural forms, metric designs, cadences and many others, toward building the fully constructed musical work. In the process and during the various performances, there may be a considerable dimension of improvisation.

4 This category features an instrumental ensemble genre that, for the most part, is precomposed, but includes passages in which the individual musicians improvise calls with responses

by the other musicians. Known by the name *taḥmīlah*, this genre is associated with the earlier traditional Egyptian repertoire, although it is also performed in other Near Eastern places. Its aesthetic seems closely attuned to the *takht* medium, being an intimate collection of distinctive, as well as compatible, sonic elements. The genre is almost entirely metric and uses lively rhythmic modes that bring into the performance a dance-like ambiance. The structure of the *taḥmīlah* may vary. However, usually there is a group-played theme that opens the musical piece and that reappears in some form at the end. In the middle come the episodes in which each of the single instrumentalists is expected to engage in the, typically short, calls in alternation with group responses. Then there comes a related full-ensemble theme for the closing.

In this art form, the execution is technically challenging throughout, but especially in the solo-group exchanges, which are viewed as the climactic features. To begin, in the group passages, the performers must be musically responsive, confident and mutually interactive. Also in the call-and-response dialogues, the musicians progressively and gradually shift into the higher basic phases of the original *maqām*, as well as modulate to other *maqāmāt*. Meanwhile, a certain hierarchy may be observed, when a celebrated or guest caller is given certain prominence. In practice, the musicians are judged by their individual abilities to improvise, as well as to play together as a group.

A further category consists of a vocal composition that includes a middle section in which the leading singer engages in complex and highly creative interactions with the accompanying chorus. This genre, namely the *dawr*, which is closely associated with Egypt and uses colloquial Egyptian lyrics, was one of the classic musical specialties of the most eminent singers and composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of them were affiliated with, or influence by, the local Sufi orders. Among the well-known who were singers and, in many cases, composers as well, included Muḥammad ʻUthmān (1845–1900), who was known for developing the art form and introducing important technical features in its structure; ʻAbduh al-Ḥāmūlī (ca. 1843–1901) and those who were active during the early decades of phonographic recording were Shaykh Yūsuf al-Manyalawī (1847–1911), Shaykh Ṣayyid al-Ṣaftī (1875–1939), Dāwūd Ḥumṣī (1870–1937), Ṣāliḥ ʻAbd al-Hayy (1896–1962) and others.[6]

In terms of structure, the *dawr* begins with a precomposed section in the *maqām* of the composition and is sung by the leading vocalist alone or with some musical "touch ups" by the vocal accompanist. The composition closes with a segment that is related to, or an abbreviation of, the opening section. In these two parts, as usual, they use a rather slow or stately *īqāʻ*, or meter, namely the eight-beat *maṣmūdī* pattern. However, the middle part, or the *hānk* section, presents a vast arena for improvisatory musical workmanship between the leading singer, or *muṭrib* (literally, *ṭarab* maker) and the chorus, namely the *sannīdah* (singular, *sannīd*, or "supporter"). The features that appear in this inner section are somehow filtered from the main musical opening material, thus bringing to mind the notion of a musical development. What happens includes interaction between the leader and the chorus initiated by the leader; introducing repetitions of chorus phrases or single words, or even syllables that provide shifting backgrounds for the leading vocalist's responses. Also, presented are melodic and rhythmic ostinatos for the leader's vocalized stretches in the original *maqām* and in other related *maqāmāt*. Another particularly notable technique is referred to as *āhāt* (singular, *āh*), literally a sustained choral vocalized note on this syllable. In this case, an *āh* drone is initiated to form a background for the vocalist. Such a drone may shift to yet other higher steps and so on. The percussion, typically on the *riqq*, maintains a *waḥdah*, namely the basic repeated accentual pattern.

Historically, the domain of the *dawr* gradually declined across the middle of the 20th century, to the disappointment of some musical theorists, composers and aficionados in many parts of the Arab world. Some have blamed the incursion of Westernization and the influence

of commercial sound recording, as well as the lack of the needed skill and the interest. Further noticed also has been the fixation of the intricate musical workmanship that used to be extemporized. However, such more set and modernized examples have included some interesting pieces by Shaykh Sayyid Darwīsh (1893–1923) and Muḥammad ʻAbd al-Wahhāb (ca. 1901–91).[7] And in later years, brilliant performances were given by Mary Jibrān (1911–56), who was born in Beirut, Lebanon, stayed for some time in Egypt and later was active in Syria. She was highly admired for her "authentic" skills and for being a musician's musician. Also nowadays greatly admired have been the contemporary oriented versions by Syrian singers, such as the famous Aleppo superstar Ṣabaḥ Fakhrī (b. 1933).

6 Another category consists of a basically precomposed song genre in which the singer includes an inner passage for taking musical liberties that are based on the song proper. The material considered here is reminiscent of the previous category, but it has its own ambiance and emotional dynamic. Instead of interacting with a chorus, the solo singer is accompanied by a *firqah*, which is comparable to, but a bit larger than, the *takht*. With its generic name, as *ughniyah* (literally, song), it refers to the typical urban song, which in this case is relatively long and most often uses local colloquial Arabic or sometimes classical Arabic for the lyrics. It may appear in different structural forms and usually has an instrumental prelude, instrumental interludes and other related sections. Furthermore, the music may be presented live in concert halls and public venues or heard on radio broadcast**s** or on available recordings.

This profile actually applies to the late celebrated legend, Egyptian diva Umm Kulthūm (1904–75). Most applicably perhaps are her longer traditional works from the late 1940s and early 1950s, years that some devotees consider to be her golden treasures. She worked with some favorite composers and lyricists, as well as recognized her faithful listeners who looked forward to savor the ecstatic *ṭarab* experience and to relish the singer's musical mastery and compelling presence (see Danielson 1997). In the course of the typical concert, or *ḥalflah* (which means a "ceremonial gathering"), some noteworthy gesturing or "play" may take place. One example that I refer to as "expected surprises" includes repeating a favored musical passage, or instead of proceeding with the forthcoming part of the song, repeating a full musical section, to the great excitement of the listeners.

However, in the awaited improvisatory inner segment, which incidentally does not have a standard technical term, the music takes a different and clearly felt musical ambiance. The action may become rather minimalist and delicate, with a heterophonic texture on the musical fillers. A *waḥdah* grid gives the singer a certain rhythmic framework and, with an added melodic layer, provides emphasis on the sequence of tonic notes when the singer goes into different *maqām* modulations. However, in some instances the singer may also create vocalized stretches that ride over the soft accentual track. Also sometimes Umm Kulthūm may briefly do some "text-painting" through briefly producing some suitable alteration of vocal timbres.[8]

7 The *taqāsīm* genre is probably the most familiar and the most spoken and written about. In some ways it embodies the local modal, or *maqām* system, as practice, experience and aesthetic. Furthermore, it is intimately associated with the phenomenon of improvising, or considered by some as "pure improvisation." Meanwhile, the basic improvisatory approach is shared with many practices, especially Qur'anic chanting, which is not considered "music," but rather treated as a supremely venerated expression, as well as a model for many other sacred and secular genres, such as Sufi-oriented and other vocal chant-type genres, in the Arab world and further areas in the Islamic world. Particularly significant is the presentation of the chanting message. Since the Qur'anic text is treated as holy revelation, the chanting avoids earthly impositions, such as musical composing or rhythmic application and accompaniment, for example with instruments. Instead, the chanting is technically and aesthetically shaped by the text itself in accordance with the formal articulation rules, or *tajwīd*. Moreover, in many

world communities, the deliveries have applied the Arab-oriented modal, or *maqām*, system. The chanting, especially in the ornate and melodically elaborate *mujawwad* style, has set an eloquent and engaging example of the traditional improvisatory practice.

Comparably, the *taqāsīm* genre, has a special profile of being "flexible," "free," or "natural." In other words, the perception is that the *taqāsīm* idiom is not bound by a fixed compositional structure or a strict metric pattern and, at least in the eastern Arab practice, a particular textual repertoire. Instead, the *taqāsīm* substance is viewed as a direct embodiment of the *maqām,* as potentially felt, or imagined, or simply improvised. Certainly, the *taqāsīm* material comes up when musicians wish to illustrate the *maqāmāt*. Ideally, they may do that through live illustrative examples.[9] Such intimate connections between the *taqāsīm* and the core of the musical tradition has contributed to the significance and continuity of the improvisatory practice.

In performance, the *taqāsīm*-proper has a typical profile. Generally, the performance length may range from a few minutes, for example as a filler in a composed work, to half an hour or more as an independent event. Stylistically, the performance is punctuated by short pauses that separate between the phrases. Usually, the phrases terminate with rather stylized cadential figures, or *qaflāt* (singular, *qaflah*, literally, "closure"). Emotionally charged, these typically propel the listeners to utter certain cheers, or to give compliments to the musician. Also, the individual *taqsīm* would be set in a particular *maqām*, actually one of the some dozen *maqāmāt* that are generally used. The performer may stay in the same *maqām* or make modulations to other, usually related *maqāmat* and end with a return to the original *maqām*. Good, or musically enlightened, listeners may admire the performer for his or her good pacing of the musical flow and the "natural" manner in which the modulations are executed. Also appreciated may be the consistent tempo and particularly the use of correct intonation, through the use of small and delicate microtonal intervals (or *'urab*) that instill ecstasy, or *ṭarab*, in the listeners. The musician may also be praised for introducing some "brilliant," or novel, gestures. Indeed, the *taqāsīm* event resembles telling a story, or taking a journey, while navigating through the familiar and the unexpected.

The *taqāsīm* idiom appears in different technical formats. Besides the basic solo format, or what some musicians refer to as *fālit* (literally, "loose," or "untied"), others are described below.

a *Taqāsīm* may be briefly accompanied by a drone, or *zann* (a colloquial onomatopoeic word) on a different instrument. This combination can be quite ecstatic and inspiring but may limit the freedom of shifting to different modes or, by extension, tonic stations.

b *Taqāsīm*, are often accompanied by a metric pattern (or *'ala al-waḥdah*). This addition, which, for example, consists of the repeating accentual-type meter (or *waḥdah*), may be produced on a *riqq*, or frame drum or other instruments. This combination may generate a certain appealing dynamic. However, a certain challenge may emerge, mainly in establishing good and creative coordination. Also, in this format, the improviser has to create a balance between being almost detached from the beat and, from time to time, falling right upon the beat. Actually, in the Arab tradition, when performing metrically, there appears to be a golden rule that the musicians, including singers, would like to have a steady beat, but rather to play *with* it rather than to play *on* it. In other words, treating the beat rigidly as a metronome, is a sign that the musician is not competent, or not an insider to the local musical tradition.[10] Obviously, using longer and more complex meters for accompaniment would need further attention and musical expertise. And furthermore, when the long accompanying ostinato is combined with a melodic pattern, the application may demand even more focus and calculation.

c In some contexts, the *taqāsīm* material appears as a component in some compound, or suite-like, forms. For example, the Egyptian *waṣlah* at one time typically started with an *'ūd taqsīm*

that led to a pre-composed instrumental prelude. Also included was a section of *layālī* and *mawwāl*, which are improvisatory vocal genres performed by the lead singer and accompanied by the *qanūn*. The performance usually culminated in a *dawr*. Comparatively, in the Syrian *fāṣil* medley, some *taqāsīm* sections may be heard in different places, especially to introduce certain precomposed genres. And, in North Africa, for example, in the Moroccan *nūba* (or *nawbah*) suite, which consists of a sequence of precomposed sections or "movements," and *taqāsīm* and *mawwāl*-type vocal improvisations may be included. Such improvisatory components tend to vary in their styles and functions. They may also adapt organically to the overall orientations of these aesthetic models.

However, the stylistic diversity has developed through the artists' own talents and their historical and geographical background. Since the middle decades of the 20th century, there has been an impressive assortment of profiles among the improvisers. To use the *ʻūd* as an example, the relatively few *ʻūd taqāsīm* recordings by the celebrated composer Riyāḍ al-Sunbāṭī (1906–81) have been deeply appreciated for their delicate beauty, impeccable musicianship and engaging *ṭarab* quality. The solo *ʻūd* performances of Farīd al-Aṭrash (1915–74) that have often appeared within the artist's longer songs for large Egyptian and other Arab audiences, have impressed the listeners with the strong technique and the dynamic musical ambiance. Also at times, audience members became mesmerized when in his *taqāsīm* he inserted his adaptation of "Asturias" from *Suite Española*, Op. 47, by Isaac Albéniz (1860–1909). By comparison, Munir Bashir (1930–97), with others from Iraq, studied with a virtuoso *ʻūd* teacher from Turkey – namely, Sharif Muhyi al-Din Haydar (1888–1967) – and belonged to the so-called "Iraqi *ʻūd* school." Bashir, whose *ʻūd* type produced a distinctively resonant and bright timbre, promoted the *ʻūd* as a solo concert instrument. He performed at international venues in Europe, the United States and many other countries. His musical style has evoked a meditative-like ambiance and at times recalled Spanish, Indian and blues styles, as well as incorporated Iraqi-based material. Also from the later generation, there are many highly accomplished individuals who have developed their own musical styles and careers. A case in point is Simon Shaheen (b. 1955), an internationally acclaimed *ʻūdist* and also violinist, with specialty in both the Arab and the Western styles. He is also a composer and active promoter of Arabic musical heritage, which he has presented on his many recordings and taught at his established Arab Music Retreat in the United States. Actually, he and I released a joint album titled *Taqāsīm: The Art of Improvisation in Arab Music*, featuring A.J. Racy on the *buzuq* (long-necked fretted lute) and Simon Shaheen on the *ʻūd* (Racy 1993). We presented several *maqām* renditions in a duet-like, alternating approach with the two of us.[11] Also to be acknowledged are the numerous improvisers, whose specialties have been these and other traditional instruments and idioms.

5 Coda

In this chapter, I began with a brief introductory profile meant to provide a point of entry for my presentation, as well as to orient the reader to the subject matter. However, as an ethnomusicologist and a certain insider to the research context, as well as a musician and improviser, I looked closely into the basic terminologies that we generally use and to construct a more inclusive and nuanced report on the improvisatory practice in the Arab world, with certain focus on the eastern areas. In the process, however, the probe has revealed a complex and rich creative musical terrain. Culturally, the improvisatory tradition carries shared meanings, attitudes and interpretations, as well as connotates place and self-identity. Historically, the improvisatory legacy harks back to earlier eras and brings to mind notable local and international scholars and historians. Today, among the younger generations, some collectors have developed a serious interest in sound

recordings that have included improvisatory performances from the early nineteen twenties and later. Aesthetically, or technically, the improvised repertoire is noted for its creative and varied generic forms. Particularly impressive is the imagination and vision in the production of such categories that blend both the composed and the improvised idioms. Indeed, the musical practice, which typically incorporates certain improvisatory components, has its own aesthetic and technical features that transcend common, typically formal and minimalistic theories. Emotionally, the improvisatory practice is associated with certain empowering and transforming states. Its traditional realm embraces the mystical and spiritual experiences. In essence, it also illustrates the close connection between the secular and sacred. Politically, however, the improvisatory expression has been affected, usually adversely, by the legacies of colonialism and, furthermore, the trends of Westernization and modernization. To add, the local, largely Western-oriented, Arab conservatories have seldom, if ever, offered improvisation as a study subject. Actually, some directors have frowned upon the improvisatory endeavor. However, given the recent interest in the local musical heritage, the expanding cosmopolitan climate and the increasing geographical contacts have encouraged musicians from different cultural backgrounds to perform together. Such "fusions" have given improvisation further importance, as well as added characteristics to the new cross-cultural musical language.[12] Briefly, besides the world-nourishing and timeless artistry, improvisation is a metaphor for our quests and curiosities, as well as a microcosm of our lifelong expectations and experiences.

Notes

1 Such interesting and useful synonyms can be found in the authoritative *The Synonym Finder*, Rodale J. I. and editors. For these and other expressions, see the entries "improvisation," "improvise" and "improvised" (1978: 546–7).

2 Incidentally, another interesting formal Arabic term is *istiṭrād*, which applies when a speaker is carried away, or adds some ideas that are not meant to be included. Usually critiqued or sometimes appreciated, such unplanned additions may bring to mind such notions as "impromptu" or "off-the-cuff," or perhaps just "improvised."

3 My late father, Salām Racy (Salām al-Rāsī, 1911–2003), who came from a family of writers and artists, was known as a poet and communicator. He was born and grew up in the Lebanese village of Ibl al-Saqī. He possessed a remarkable talent for storytelling or, as he later on preferred it to be known, for being a tale (*ḥikāyāt*) reciter. In his renditions or narratives, he weaved particular nuances, details and vivid depictions through a distinct dimension of wit and humor. In the 1960s, he began to write his repertoire in his own style in classical Arabic with occasional inserts in colloquial Arabic. He gained significant popularity in Lebanon and the Arab world, as a historian, folklorist, oral historian and social critic, as well as a "teller." Besides his sixteen best-sellers, he gave public lectures and performances and presented a popular series of his own talks for television. He also received numerous honorable recognitions by officials and cultural and literary societies.

4 The project took place when I was a graduate student at the University of Illinois, USA. For the project, I recorded my own examples at different times on the *buzuq* (long-necked fretted lute) and the *nāy* (reed flute). These were *taqāsīm* (singular *taqsīm*, or instrumental improvisation) in a variety of *maqāmāt* (singular *maqām*, or melodic mode). From the selections, the researchers chose sixteen examples in the mode Nahawand. Now, I am remembering with great respect of my late mentor, Professor Bruno Nettl, and my late older friend and, at the time, my fellow graduate student at the University of Illinois, Dr. Ronald (Ron) Riddle.

5 A well-known Egyptian musicologist, namely, Dr. Samha Elkholy (Samḥa al-Khawlī), brought up the borrowed term for this practice and recognized the importance of the musical phenomenon in Arab music. See Elkholy 1978. See also Racy 2003: 80–2.

6 The title "Shaykh" is given to males who have been connected with a religious or Sufi background.

7 In two well-known compositions, one by Darwīsh and another by 'Abd al-Wahhāb, the *āhāt* segments incorporate some Western-sounding harmony.

8 For an excellent example of songs from the era mentioned, I recommend these three: The first is titled "Ghulibt Aṣāliḥ," with Aḥmad Rāmī (1892–1981) as lyricist and Riyād al-Sunbātī (1906–81) as composer. The second song is titled "il-Awwilah fil-Gharām," with Bayram al-Tūnisi (1893–1961) as lyricist and Shaykh Zakariyyā Aḥmad (1896–1961) as composer. The third song is titled "Anā fī Intiẓārak," with Bayram al-Tūnisī as lyricist and Shaykh Zakariyyā Aḥmad as composer.

9 Often, the theoretical representations through bare scales, tetrachords and different intervals, usually based on a fixed equal-tempered quartertone system, give a minimalist and compromising view of the musical practice.

10 Actually, this aesthetic applies to other traditions. For example, in a jazz colloquium certain members made interesting comments, for example, by Charles Keil, on "participatory discrepancies," or as being "in sync but out of phase" (1995: 8). See Keil 1995.

11 The album, which has been widely listened to and theoretically studied by musicians, students and other improvisers, has notes by Philip Schuyler (Lyrichord Stereo LP and CD. LLST 7374, New York, recorded in 1982, released in 1983).

12 For more information on world musical fusions, including my own participation in them, see Racy 2016: 239–43.

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PART IV

Improvisation in the Visual, Narrative, Dramatic, and Interactive Arts

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DANCE IMPROVISATION AS EXPERIMENTAL INQUIRY

Eric Mullis

1 Introduction: Improvisation and the Democratization of Dance

In the 1960s, work in performance studies began to expand the notion of theatrical performance, with a significant amount of scholarship utilizing cultural anthropology, which shows that non-Western theatrical traditions significantly differ from Western theater (Schechner 2017). For example, whereas theater from the ancient Greeks to the early modern era emphasized dramatic texts, many non-Western cultures value orality and do not utilize the plot-based structures that Aristotle advocated for in the *Poetics* (Belfiore 1992). At the same time, sociological work on role-playing came to support an expanded understanding of theatrical performance is. Most famously, Erving Goffman (1974) showed that bodily comportment, dress, props, and staging facilitate the execution of private and public roles – such as father, mother, teacher, businessperson, lawyer, politician, or artist – and this was seen as challenging the professionalized elitism of Western theater because it implies that, to some extent, everyone is an actor, costumer, and dramaturg.

Moving closer to dance improvisation, a similar expanded understanding of the performative developed in dance studies. The modern era witnessed the emergence of the professional choreographer – an artist with a distinct artistic vision that informed the development of dance technique and a related ability to innovatively organize movements of performers in time and space. Dance historian Susan Foster observes that, at the height of midcentury modernism, "the choreographer was one who could synthesize the knowledge gained through the study of compositional craft and technique, [...] a process that replicated and reinforced the mandate for a dance to fuse personal and universal concerns" (2010: 52). This was instrumental in consolidating the fine art status of dance because notions of artistic authorship, creativity, genius, and prestige are readily apparent in other art discourses. In turn, innovative choreographers such as George Balanchine, Martha Graham, and Merce Cunningham were viewed as having the same status as the giants of music, literature, painting, sculpture, and so on.

However, in the 1960s, American postmodern choreographers associated with Judson Church in New York City began to downplay choreographic authorship and, more generally, to question the specialization that separated dance from everyday life (Banes 1980). They eschewed the artifices of artificial theatricality characteristic of ballet and modern dance and experimented with new ways of developing movements such as pedestrian-like tasks, serial repetition, gesture, and improvisation (Burt 2007). Due, in part, to their efforts, dance artists and theorists began to argue for an expanded understanding of choreography, which holds that choreographic ordering is readily apparent in social life (Hewitt 2005). Navigating a busy airport or queuing up to wait on

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a train are choreographic activities, as is a wedding ritual for, in either case, the individual organizes postures and movements in a manner consistent with others so that common goals can be realized. Further, body practices like running, yoga, or the martial arts are choreographic because they entail the execution of codified movement sequences as well as the organization of people in space in a manner that facilitates physical performance.

Hence, as with "performance," "the choreographic" came to be seen as a fundamental aspect of social experience and, indeed, the two are intertwined, for the yoga instructor performs a distinct role while teaching a class that is characterized by a distinct approach to bodily comportment, voice, and clothing and, at the same time, they oversee the organization of space and the execution of codified movements by class attendees.

Walking through an airport or executing a basketball play can unfold with the means and aims of activity coalescing as intended. However, it is often the case that something unexpected occurs and one has to quickly adapt in a manner that achieves the desired end (for example, there is a bottle-neck of people in an airport terminal that must be quickly navigated or a player on the other team reads and then disrupts the play). Moments of impromptu decision-making occur in all walks of life, including practical activities such as cooking or driving to work, and more specialized ones such as playing soccer. Movement improvisation is a fundamental aspect of experience because we are embodied beings moving through physical and social environments that are always, to some extent, beyond our immediate control. In everyday life, improvisation marks moments in which control is lost and, when successful, it facilitates reintegration into (or possibly subverts) environmental dynamics.

Many social dances feature codified movements that the dancer can creatively sequence during performance. For example, flatfooting is a solo form of folk dance that developed in the American South in the 17th century, which features percussive footwork that is kept low to the floor and performed with string-band music (Jamison 2015). The flatfooter is free to sequence steps such as the "walking step," "rock step," "Alamo step," and the "Maupin," and free to change facings and experiment with variations in physical effort, rhythm, and speed. Further, in dialogic fashion, they can choose to respond to a particular aspect of the music (for example, by counterpointing a rhythm) or relate to another dancer by quoting or paraphrasing their moves. This dynamic relationship between codified steps, improvising soloist, and music characterizes many social dances including traditional Ghanaian dance (Gottschild 1996), Bharatanatyam (O'Shea 2007), the Cancan (Parfitt 2019), vintage jazz dance (Jackson 2001), belly dancing (Shay 2002), and forms of dance club dancing. Of course, there are important differences between these styles, but they share an approach in which codified movements are physically mastered and then increasingly personalized through experimentation in the moment of performance.

Improvisatory social dancing contextualizes some of the innovations made by postmodern choreographers such as Richard Bull, Simone Forti, Yvonne Rainer, Steve Paxton, and Barbara Dilley. To anticipate a point that will be developed in more detail, these artists valued improvisation because it provided aesthetic alternatives to ballet and modern dance and because it maximizes the dancer's agency. Their work was historically preceded by Anna Halprin, who, in the 1940s and 50s, developed improvisation techniques to cultivate the individual's sensitivity to and manipulation of kinesthetic experience (Ross 2009). Instead of adopting another person's movements, the dancer experimented with their own, which subverted the traditional hierarchical choreographer-dancer relationship (Novack 1990).[1] This approach to movement experimentation is consistent with improvisatory social dancing, which is generally decentralized, often taught informally in celebratory communal contexts, and which celebrates individual expression and innovation (DeFrantz 2016). Hence, the Judson artists challenged the division of art and life both

by avoiding conventional theatricality and by using a more egalitarian approach to creating dance movement that has deep cultural and cross-cultural roots.

This leads me to briefly consider relationships between everyday movement improvisation, social dance, and dance improvisation. Whereas improvising in a crowded airport entails spontaneous decision-making aimed at resolving a pressing practical problem, improvised social dance breaks with practical efficacy. The repertoires of movements are non-instrumental in nature and are often performed in specialized places – such as community centers, dance studios, or dance clubs – that are functionally and socially conducive to dancing. Improvisation by dance artists also entails approaches to movement experimentation (more on this in just a moment) that diverge from the utilitarian logic of pedestrian tasks and require places such as dance studios, galleries, and theatres for performance. Hence, the three kinds of improvisation are alike in that they entail responsive physical adaptation to fluidly changing social environments (e.g., "thinking on one's feet"), but the nature of the choreography – the approach to organizing movement and the site of performance – differs because they aim to realize distinct performative ends.

The commonality helps explain why some dance improvisers observe that their training significantly affects their everyday experience (Midgelow 2019a: 6–7). Because an actor studies the construction and performance of theatrical roles, they refine awareness of moments in which they or those around them execute or experiment with new social roles (Zamir 2014). Similarly, the choreographer will be more attuned to the choreographies of everyday life (e.g., soccer plays, people moving through shopping malls, and the flight patterns of flocking birds), and the trained improvisor will remain attuned to the moments in which choreographic order is destabilized and adaptation necessitated. Sustained practice in the artificial environment of the dance studio both facilitates the realization of artistic ends and serves as rehearsal for everyday movement improvisation. In order to clarify how, more needs to be said about approaches to improvisation training and how they affect the self.[2]

2 Knowing How to Improvise

As William James and John Dewey observed, much of traditional Western epistemology is characterized by the belief that the mind has unfettered access to reality – a belief contingent on the assumptions that aspects of reality are unchanging and, like the mind itself, are rational in nature (Dewey 1988; James 1996). If this is the case, then first-hand experience may be unnecessary for attaining knowledge because the powers of the intellect can directly discern truths that experience could disclose. This can be seen, for example, in a-contextual work in the philosophy of art on artistic creativity – such as Kant's (1987) account of artistic genius or Collingwood's (1947) understanding of artistic expression – which does not consider the practicalities of artistic education and how different artists working with different media go about researching, experimenting, and refining their crafts.

Dewey (2007) argued that Darwin's theory of evolution challenged traditional epistemology because it demonstrated that nature continually evolves and, therefore, does not feature fixed essences that await intellectual discovery. The social sciences have also demonstrated that cultures and individuals continually change over time and, consequently, that established knowledge must be historically situated and critically evaluated because the conditions within which it originated have likely changed. To return to the example, classical views of artistic creativity grew out of specific cultural milieus and, because art history is not static, they must be reassessed in light of more contemporary developments (Rancière 2013).

In turn, James (2012) argued that the traditional emphasis on rational deliberation overlooks alternative ways of generating knowledge. One of his examples is cultivating a friendship with an acquaintance, for though a good deal may be known about them, one cannot be certain

about what the friendship will be like until it is established. That is, the quality of the relationship is an emergent phenomenon that cannot be clearly discerned in advance (James also cites moral deliberation which similarly entails the emergence of knowledge through experience). Hence, because the world is continually changing and since some kinds of knowledge can only arise in the course of experience, pragmatists argue for a philosophical experimentalism which holds that individuals must actively seek out new experiences to generate new forms of knowledge. Drawing closer to dance improvisation, contemporary pragmatist Richard Shusterman develops this by considering implications for the philosophy of embodiment (2009, 2012). On the classical view, the body has a fixed essence – for example, the dualist holds that the body houses the immaterial mind – but, consistent with postmodern ethics, Shusterman argues for a body-based experimentalism which holds that embodiment is plastic and can be cultivated through intelligent experiential inquiry.

Indeed, pragmatist body-based experimentalism dovetails with the notion of "practice-as-research" apparent in the writings of dance improvisors (Midgelow 2019b). When developing a dance, one can draw on different forms of research, such as studying relevant cultural history or works by acclaimed choreographers on the same subject matter. One can also conduct interviews, execute ethnographic fieldwork, or collaborate with an artist who used a different medium to address the same subject (Mullis 2019). Whereas knowledge cultivated through such research is personal (e.g., knowledge by association) or factual (e.g., propositional knowledge) in nature, practice-as-research generates *procedural knowledge* through a self-reflective process of experimenting with bodily states in a studio setting. For example, Ann Cooper Albright (2007) used this approach while researching a project on the American modern dance pioneer Loïe Fuller, who famously developed a costume that consisted of a long silk dress with sections that she manipulated with wing-like appendages to create flowing sculptural forms (Garelick 2009; Rancière 2013: 93–110). Albright recreated the costume, learned and performed choreographic sequences from Fuller's *Serpentine Dance* (1891) that are preserved on film and, in the process, experienced a unique form of dance embodiment – a fusion of movement and costume – that was to some extent akin to Fuller's. Unanticipated procedural knowledge emerged regarding the quantity and quality of arm and shoulder strength required to execute the choreography, the manner in which the costume affected the sense of space around the body, and how Fuller developed the costume and the movement with her innovative lighting designs in mind.

What kind of procedural knowledge, then, emerges when practicing dance improvisation? There are many approaches to solo, duo, and group improvisation that cultivate distinct skills, for example, William Forsythe's improvisation technologies foster the ability to create dynamic geometric forms in the spaces around the body, and contact improvisation entails spontaneous partnering in which any bodily surface can function as a point of contact (Novack 1990; Huschka 2010). Procedural knowledge procured by these practices can be conceived instrumentally in the manner of a tool that allows one to manipulate aspects of the external environment at will (e.g., the contact improvisor knows how to efficiently mitigate unexpected shifts in their partner's weight) but, it also discloses something about the knower.

We can begin by noting that mastery of dance technique heightens the sense of bodily availability. If I know how to flatfoot and attend a social gathering where people are dancing various forms of Appalachian folk dance, then I will feel a readiness, even a propensity, to dance. Carrie Noland (2009) refers to this as "kinesthetic agency" or the sense in which the body becomes available in terms of the potential to perform a trained technique. This has analogs in sports and in everyday life, for when the athlete steps onto the field of play, their body becomes ready to perform, and, as Heidegger observed, the body readily orients itself to execute everyday tasks (2010: 99–107). Contemporary dancers are unique, however, because they often learn several styles of dance (and practice somatic disciplines such as postural yoga and Pilates), instead of mastering

one body discipline. Consequently, their bodies become capable of functionally reorganizing in multiple ways; the integrated systems of motor schemas characteristic of dance techniques function like suits of clothes that can be changed into or out of in preparation for a rehearsal or for a ballet, modern dance, or folk-dance class. Awareness of bodily availability comes to the fore when functionally oriented transitions occur from an everyday mode of embodiment to a dancerly one, from one way of dancing to another, and when, after the dancing is done, psychosomatic effects caused by the movements are attuned to. In any case, the dancer comes to know their body as a multivalent medium that remains ready to adapt to distinct performative conditions. Because of the aim of choreographing extemporaneously, however, dance improvisation is characterized by a different kind of kinesthetic agency, and, in order to clarify this point, more needs to be said about the practice-as-research that many improvisors engage in.

A commonly used tool is the improvisation "score," which provides a frame for extemporaneous decision-making. Scores feature "structures," the things that are chosen to be carefully attended to (such as specific parts of the body, movement qualities, or uses of external space) and "delimitations," or what is intentionally ignored (such as emotional responses or things in the physical environment). To take an example, William Forsythe's improvisation technologies is a modular system composed of movement strategies that can be variously combined to create scores. The strategies entail that the individual envisions points on the body and in the surrounding space and then imagines lines and shapes that can be created and manipulated when the points are connected or moved. For example, while standing, one can envision a point on the left knee-cap and, as if it were the tip of a pen or piece of chalk, use a counter-clockwise motion of the left leg to draw an imaginary circle in the vertical place just in the space just in front of the knee. Then, one could walk to another location and draw a new circle with the right shoulder (perhaps this time with a bigger circumference) and then continue the task by experimenting with other body parts, filling the space with many imaginary circles at different heights. A second strategy is to imaginatively "erase" an existing circle by reversing the original movement (e.g., a clock-wise movement with the left knee) and, indeed, the two strategies can be combined, as one draws a circle with the left knee and then erases it with a different body part (such as the right shoulder).

The structures of this "draw-erase" score are geometric shapes and patterns, and its task-like orientation entails delimitations such as not speaking while performing and ignoring psychological content that would interfere with the endeavor. It is indicative of improvisation scores that investigate formal possibilities of dance movement. Other approaches utilize visualization to mobilize anatomical systems and evoke psychosomatic states (for example, imagining that one is moving underwater or imagining that one's head is full of a gas that floats upwards) while others capitalize on the power of metaphor ("move like maple leaves riding a breeze" or "move like a fire that fiercely consumes old weathered log") and give the improvisor the opportunity to experiment with movement analogs. In any case, the score provides a specific context for decision-making, challenges existing ways of moving, and, if approached rigorously, produces movement that appears to be, to the outside observer, aesthetically coherent.

Although the observer may be unaware of the score that informs the dancer's movements, in most cases, the performer will utilize one that can sustain audience interest, that is, one that features movement variations and, to some extent, manifests a thematic or theatrical trajectory.[3] For example, one could use a score with sections that cause distinct changes in movement quality and, more generally, consider how individual movements can be composed in space and time. A clear temporal relationship can be established by repeating the same movement during different parts of the performance, and a spatiotemporal relationship created by repeating a movement in two different locations. These kinds of choices culminate in the phenomenon of composing while dancing; the process in which the dancer choreographically organizes improvised movements in a manner that facilitates the audience's perception of the dance.

Following the structures and delimitations of a score and organizing actions in a compositional manner requires a highly refined "tracking" ability, which entails keeping the sequence of choices in memory, calculating possible courses of action, noticing instances in which one gets stuck (e.g., repeating the same movement too many times), and keeping a clear sense of how long one has been performing. Importantly, because one cannot rely on choreographed structures and one is being observed by a critical audience, the improvisor also has to track moments in which adrenaline causes loss of control and moments of attentional implosion in which absorption in a difficult task causes everything else to disappear from the field of consciousness.

Tracking skills also disclose habitual ways of moving that may otherwise go unnoticed. It can be specific movements (for example, when given the option, I will choose to turn to the left because I feel more stable on my left leg), how speed and effort are utilized (my preference is to move slowly and continuously in a relaxed Tai Chi–like manner), use of rhythms (my go-to is sequences of three or four movements and then a pause), and where the gaze tends to fall (usually a diffuse focus on the space at a medium distance from my body). After becoming aware of such habits, scores can be used to inhibit them or to experiment with other ways of moving. For example, one could use a score that feels quite foreign; because of previous training, I have a formalist sensibility and enjoy the geometric nature of Forsythe's improvisation technologies but could experiment with metaphors to discover new movement possibilities. At the same time, scores allow one to work with existing habits in a manner that undermines their automatism; after observing a tendency to move my left arm in a spiral pattern in front of my torso, in the moment in which I notice it occurring, a conscious choice can be made to creatively alter it by performing it in reverse or tilting its axis in space in a manner that changes its orientation to the body. The pattern could also be transposed onto another body part, such as the right leg, chin, or earlobe (e.g., a "motor equivalence").

This is reminiscent of Kant's (1995) notion of moral self-governing in which one resists expedient and self-serving moral inclinations – an aspect of one's heteronomy – and makes a rational, autonomous decision to follow a moral principle. Of course, a key difference is that the knowledge Kant emphasizes is analytic in nature since, in his account, ethical principles are rational – e.g., acting unethically entails, in a self-contradictory fashion, following a principle that cannot be universalized such that everyone else can follow it – and improvisation entails procedural knowledge. The improvisor is aware that – unlike analytic, personal, or propositional knowledge, which can be attained rather quickly (for example, upon comprehending the law of non-contradiction, viewing art in an art museum, or reading a book) – because it is an affair of generating new perceptual and motor habits, know-how is manifestly diachronic in nature; it operates on a substantial delay. This illustrates Derrida's (2005: 222) point about auto-affection – the process by which one consciously or unconsciously acts on oneself in order to create a desired psychosomatic state – that autonomy and heteronomy, on close inspection, are deeply intertwined. That is, intentionally cultivating new habits is an exercise in autonomy, but heteronomy always remains because one has no cognitive or perceptual access to the causal process by which new motor schemas are formed or their subsequent functioning.

Awareness of this accrues in the improvisor's experience as moments of surprise. After creatively experimenting with my habitual arm pattern for some time, while improvising, I notice unfamiliar kinesthetic sensations characteristic of a new and unfamiliar arm movement, and the realization occurs that the old habit no longer exerts such a strong hold on my actions. There are also moments of surprise in which an unexpected choice occurs that is consistent with the structures of the score. For example, if extensive time has been spent training a motor equivalence in which different body parts are moved in a spiraling pathway, one may discover that, in the moment of performance, a part of the body not previously chosen (say, the left heel) spontaneously moves in the pathway. Further, if consistent experimentation has been done rotating axes of movement

pathways in space, one may discover that the heel moves in a spiral at an unconventional angle – that is, that two distinct strategies have spontaneously combined.

Experiences of surprise reveal that, whereas the kinesthetic agency characteristic of dance technique is indicative of known movement patterns, improvisation entails cultivating availability for unanticipated movement. Both are contingent on rigorous and consistent training, but improvisation is distinct because it entails self-reflective experimentation with the dynamics of habit and choice. The dancer knows their movement habits, preferences, and dispositions, becomes aware of them as they manifest (and, indeed, can predict when they will occur), and, in response, decides to explore alternatives to them. Hence, their procedural knowledge has less to do with training the body to move in a predetermined fashion, and more to do with investigating the conditions of possibility. Their know-how concerns the ability to generate the unknown (Foster 2003: 3 f.).[4]

Here I would like to shift the example from solo improvisation to contact improvisation in order to develop another point about the improvisor's procedural knowledge. Something implicit in the preceding discussion is that improvisation necessitates a keen sense of the present moment. Foster writes that improvisation features "a kind of hyperawareness of the relation between immediate action and overall shape, between that which is about to take place or is taking place and that which has and will take place" (Foster 2003: 7). Reminiscent of phenomenological bracketing, this entails a kind of "mirroring" in which the individual approaches an experience as neutrally as possible. For example, during contact improvisation, my partner could do something unexpected such as lose their balance and crash their body into mine, and I could react by judging them as clumsy or by getting angry because they could have caused me to fall in an unsafe manner. However, in order to continue with the task of cooperatively improvising together, that is, to mitigate the chaotic energy and redirect it to a more balanced state, the crash has to be accepted as just another spontaneous transfer of weight between our bodies. That ability is contingent on perceptual attunement (often cultivated through practice of mindfulness techniques) and the mastery of dynamic anatomical structures conducive to bearing and physically negotiating the weight of another body.

Contact improvisation shows that responsiveness to external forces can be cultivated to the extent that they become vectors for one's movement. It facilitates an experience in which the point of contact between bodies functions as a dynamically energetic node and in which a phenomenological blurring of self and other occurs. In turn, a unique form of kinesthetic agency arises in which one individual's intentionality extends through the other's body, which functions in the manner of an enhancing prosthetic (Flakne 2019). There is much more to say about the subjectivity characteristic of this sense of agency, but I would like to emphasize that it is possible only if the body is transformed such that it is increasingly available to – even desirous of – encounters with unpredictable external forces.

3 Seeing Improvisation

An important moment occurred in Western dance history when, influenced by his artistic and life partner John Cage, the choreographer Merce Cunningham began experimenting with indeterminacy in the creative process. While developing dances in the late 1950s, Cunningham allowed chance to determine certain compositional decisions, for example, by treating a blank sheet of paper as representative of the stage space, marking imperfections in the weave of the paper with a pencil, and then anchoring a choreographic phrase to the equivalent point on the stage (Noland 2019). This gave Cunningham alternatives to his compositional preferences that were informed by his training as well as existing conventions of concert dance (in this case, conventions concerning the theatrical significance of specific places on the stage). He also injected indeterminacy into

dance performance by creating choreographic phrases, teaching them to the dancers in his ensemble, and giving them the freedom to decide where and when they could be executed. Over time, however, core members of his ensemble—including Steve Paxton, the originator of contact improvisation—became frustrated with Cunningham's strategies because they narrowly constrained choice and, therefore, only gestured towards increasing the dancer's agency (Brown 2007: 66–70). Cunningham valued chance but framed it such that the movement would manifest a coherent aesthetic that a more open-ended improvisatory approach would undermine.

This points to a dialectical relationship between improvisation and choreography that has implications for how audiences appreciate improvised performance. Paxton and his Judson peers began rigorously experimenting with improvisation, with a culminating endeavor being The Grand Union: an improvisational dance group that originated in Yvonne Rainer's *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* (1970), that performed from 1970 through 1976, and which featured, among others, Rainer, Paxton, Trisha Brown, Barbara Dilley, Douglas Dunn, David Gordon, and Nancy Lewis (Perron 2020). During remarks at a theater conference in 1982, Gordon described a concert that the group gave in the state of Ohio:

> An audience of 200 showed up […] after the first half-hour, there were approximately 150 people left, and after the second half-hour there were 100 people and by the time performance ended there were somewhere between 12 and 20 people left, and those few people who stayed around at the end, asked us where we were going next. "You don't know what this means to us out here," they said. "You don't know what you've done, how you've changed our lives." It took me awhile to understand that if 180 people walk out, it isn't the end of the world; if the 20 people left have the best time they've ever had.

We cannot know for certain the reasons audience members had for leaving the performance, but it is likely that many of them expected to see dancing consistent with a more traditional understanding of the art form, and instead witnessed a group of performers making creative choices on the fly, some of which came to fruition and some that did not. Improvised dance is likely to be judged as artistically poor if measured against polished choreography, and this entails a category mistake in which standards from one artistic genre are used to judge another (Walton 1970). As with the early Cage-Cunningham collaborations, Grand Union performances stoked negative reactions because conventional standards of artistic excellence were ignored and because they posed a question to the audience regarding how the performance could be appreciated.

How then should improvisation be judged? Foster suggests that viewers may appreciate the liveness of extemporaneous decision-making: "[V]iewers participate along with the performers in the open field of possible choices and the performers' construction and selection of those choices through which meaning is determined" (Foster 2003: 9). Consistent with this, Curtis Carter suggests that change, flow, and the risk associated with fast, efficient decision-making are relevant (Carter 2000: 189). To these points, in some video recordings of contact improvisation from the 1970s, one can see physical risks being taken as individual dancers throw themselves into movements with abandon, trusting that their partner to be available to respond and quickly mitigate the risk. There are also moments in which the expression on a performer's face changes from one of intense focus to joyous surprise because something unexpected (and, at the same time, consistent with the score) occurred. Also, in Grand Union performances, one can observe instances in which individuals choosing to reiterate, counterpoint, creatively develop, ignore, or override decisions made by other performers. These examples show that aesthetic appreciation of improvisation is an affair of perceiving dynamic communicative relationships between performers.

This is harder to discern, however, when there is just one dancer, for the moments of intelligent decision-making are not reiterated, developed, or challenged by other performers. That is, flow,

risk, and change are relational properties that are more apparent when an individual's actions are contextualized by those of other agents within the context of an agreed upon score. With solo improvisation, though, it can be difficult for the audience to ascertain the nature of the score and how it contextualizes the decision-making process.[5] This is highlighted in a famous dialogue between Steve Paxton and Bill T. Jones that took place after they both performed solos at Movement Research in New York City in 1982.[6] Paxton reiterates the postmodern criticism of theatricality (e.g., that it plays into conventional audience expectations), and Jones points out that this flirts with solipsism, for the improvisor could brilliantly explore what for them is unknown and all the while ignore their audience. Whereas choreography, theatricality, and the dynamics of group improvisation provide guideposts for aesthetic appreciation, solo improvisation gives the viewer a great deal of interpretive freedom.

As Kent DeSpain (2019) observes, the relationship between improvisation and choreography significantly changed in the decades after Paxton and Jones' exchange. A first reason is that improvisation became a well-established dance practice, with many university dance programs including improvisation courses in their curricula, and scores of contemporary choreographers using it as a tool to generate movement for choreography (Banes 2003: 82). Both trends center on the notion that improvised movement expresses individuality, as the undergraduate dancer who has spent years imitating others and otherwise being told how to move may find the practice powerfully transformative. In addition, improvisation has been used in professional contexts to develop idiosyncratic movements of the dancer that may not aesthetically align with those of codified dance forms.

Another factor is that improvisation techniques have developed considerably, to the extent that well-trained performers often look as if they are performing set choreography when they improvise. A high-level contact improvisation duet with acrobatic lifting and dramatic weight sharing can appear choreographed as can a solo improvisation by a dancer who has dedicated significant amounts of time to rigorously training Forsythe's improvisation technologies. Performativity can be honed through, among other things, refining tracking skills, developing scores that foster aesthetic unity and variety, and video recordings to envision the audience's perspective. Extemporaneous decision-making in the moment of performance becomes indiscernible from choreographic thinking. Indeed, during the course of their discussion, Paxton makes a comment about the poem that Jones recited during his dance solo and, in reply, Jones reveals that it was, in fact, improvised. This is a poignant moment given that a master improvisor such as Paxton was mistaken about a virtuosic improvised solo. It points to the fact that, paradoxically, masterful improvisation tends to appear non-spontaneous.[7]

This leads DeSpain to conclude that choreographic values have won the day because improvisation is used instrumentally to generate movement that is set, refined in rehearsals, and repeatedly performed onstage, and because improvisors cultivate their abilities to the extent that they appear to be executing choreography.[8] Improvisatory experimentation that does not meet expectations regarding physical virtuosity and refined compositional thinking – for example, those that are uninteresting or that fail—will be judged aesthetically poor. Hence, historically, the Judson artists used improvisation to destabilize concert dance but, over time, their innovations have come to support it – for aesthetic standards of good choreography are increasingly relevant for the appreciation of improvisation.

4 Ways to Keep Moving

Before concluding, I would like to return to a line of thought developed in the first section of this essay concerning how improvisation is culturally situated.

Because the practice features self-reflective experimentation with psychosomatic habits, it may destabilize the self. The process of intentionally changing habits is consistent with the postmodern pursuit of "creative self-fashioning," in which one actively pursues novel forms of embodied experience that challenge existing beliefs, values, and dispositions (Shusterman 2000). Practicing improvisation scores that push out of one's comfort zone, refine perceptual attunement skills, and render one responsive to environmental forces allows for a gradual transformation of one's existing ways of perceiving and acting, to the extent that the self may be significantly affected.

This returns me to the example of a university student who encounters improvisation in a dance class where they are encouraged to carefully investigate their own ways of moving. They may observe that their previous dance training still determines their choices, and also discover dispositions indicative of hegemonic values. That is, the dancer daunted by the individualized nature of improvisation may be so not only because they do not have the necessary procedural knowledge (e.g., they cannot embrace the unknown), but also because their instructors and institutions have emphasized hierarchical dynamics in which students are cast in a subservient role and in which male students are valued more than their female counterparts (Alterowitz 2014). An oft-cited example used to illustrate this point concerns a female dancer who has been conditioned to believe that women can only be lifted by men and should not lift other dancers – e.g., a traditional dance convention consistent with patriarchal gender roles. She may, upon learning contact improvisation (which aims to subvert gender construction), observe a strong personal preference for partnering with men and a psychosomatic resistance to lifting others. At the same time, while improvising with a partner in a way that entails physical risk and trust, one may observe a vague sense of discomfort and, after subsequent reflection, realize that it is a manifestation of previously unknown homophobic, sexist, racist, or ageist attitudes. In either case, improvisation can disclose problematic dispositions and, at the same time, feature practices that allow one to gradually change them. As the self is destabilized, the possibility of cultivating more ethical dispositions emerges.

As Sally Banes observes, many dancers in the 1980s and 1990s came to see contact improvisation's harmonious partnering as disconnected from sociopolitical realities such as institutionalized racism, sexism, and homophobia as well as the advent of neoliberal economics (2003: 83). The aesthetics of the form appeared inconsistent with the experience of those who were confronted by grim sociopolitical realities on a day-to-day basis. To this point, Ishmael Houston-Jones developed a partnering duet with Fred Holland – *Contact at 2nd and 10th* (1983) – in which they jockey for power by interrupting each other's movements, frenetically jump and climb on each other while wearing street clothes and army boots. The piece uses these and other strategies to challenge contact improvisation's aesthetics of fluidity and ease and, because both men are black, raises a critical question regarding race – namely, that contact is generally practiced by college-educated whites and is, therefore, disconnected from the experiences of disenfranchised racial groups. This is an important critical insight, given that the form has been lauded by practitioners and scholars as being more egalitarian than other dance forms and, more generally, *Contact at 2nd and 10th* highlights that approaches to improvisation develop in specific cultural circumstances and must be reconsidered by later generations so their destabilizing potential may be fully maximized.

Lastly, when discussing everyday movement improvisation earlier, I did so in a generalized manner that allowed me to emphasize practicalities that everyone physically negotiates. However, the choreographic is never socio-politically neutral, for social spaces feature comprehensive systems of surveillance, and individuals who move through them are never viewed equally (Lepecki 2013). The reader may recall that I suggested that, in the context of a busy airport terminal, the improvisor could spontaneously respond to a bottle-neck, perhaps, upon being bumped by another person, by responsively following the energy and then speedily dashing through an opening between two people. Because it is somewhat unconventional, that response may seem odd and possibly out of place to an observer, with the race, ethnicity, gender, age, and socioeconomic status

of the improvisor factoring into the assessment. Indeed, deviance from behavioral norms generally accrues significance (and justifies intervention by authorities) in relation to the perceived identity of the mover. This points to the broader cultural phenomenon wherein marginalized people and those living under oppressive political regimes are forced to improvise while navigating places designed to manifest and reinforce hegemonic norms (De Certeau 2011). Whereas the dance artist has the freedom to playfully experiment with embodiment and to engage in creative self-fashioning, the oppressed must improvise to mitigate – and possibly destabilize – the choreographic order.

In conclusion, I have shown that dance improvisation is best understood if it is contextualized in terms of other forms of movement improvisation, and that it features a unique form of procedural knowledge which may be used to destabilize the self as well as the existing social order.

Notes

1 In an interview Halprin says, "you came tell a modern dancer, who they had been studying with, because they become clones […] and this didn't feel right to me at all" (DeSpain 2014: 176).
2 There are many approaches to consider, but I focus here on two with which I have personal experience (and which are widely practiced and theorized): William Forsythe's improvisation technologies and contact improvisation. I do not consider approaches that feature acting, such as Ruth Zaporah's Action Theater (1995). For more on different approaches to improvisation see Albright and Gere 2003 and Buckwalter 2010.
3 Although there are uses of dance improvisation that do not entail training for performance or performing for a critical audience (for example, approaching it as of form of movement therapy), I focus here on improvisation for performance.
4 This raises an interesting question concerning the nature of the unknown and the extent to which it can be performatively embraced. To this point, Cvejić (2015: 127–59) discusses the improvised duet – *Weak Dance Strong Questions* (2001) – by Jonathan Burrows and Jan Ratsima, which takes body-based experimentalism to its logical extreme through a process of negation (e.g., by stopping movement whenever it becomes identifiable as gestural, pedestrian, or formally abstract in nature). The piece is characterized by movements that are initiated and then abandoned in the manner of verbal stuttering and is arguably premised on an understanding in which any aspect of heteronomy is eschewed in favor of autonomy. This is impossible, of course, which the performers' "stutterances" demonstrate. As I have been arguing, unknowns can also be realized through developing new habits and creatively changing existing ones. For more on this approach see Peters 2019.
5 Program notes and post-performance discussions can ameliorate the problem of self-referentiality, however, this reiterates the fact that a solo improvisation in and of itself can be opaque to the viewer. It should also be noted that many improvisors, when observing improvised performance, look for "specificity" or the sense that, even though the nature of the performer's experience is unknown, aesthetic consistency and coherence intimate that clear choices are being made within a score (DeSpain 2014: 73–9).
6 A transcription of the dialogue can be found at: https://movementresearch.org/publications/critical-correspondence/from-mrs-archives-steve-paxton-and-bill-t-jones-in-conversation-with-mary-overlie (accessed May 28, 2020).
7 For more on the aesthetic paradox of improvisation see Bertinetto 2021.
8 The latter is apparent in Forsythe's improvisation technologies and Ohad Naharin's Gaga (a movement language and pedagogy that, among other things, utilizes anatomy-based improvisation), which were developed to challenge contemporary ballet technique. Professional dancers use the improvisation strategies to creatively alter balletic postures and movements and, in this way, ballet aesthetics designed for the proscenium stage remain fundamental. For more on Gaga see Katan-Schmid 2016.

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34

THE SPRINGS OF ACTION IN BUTŌ IMPROVISATION

Carla Bagnoli

Improvisation pertains basically to all art forms in the 20th century and is often considered a mark of the contemporary. However, improvisation is ubiquitous and transcultural, and bears some paradoxical traits. On the one hand, it constitutes an aggregative force, a sort of "social effervescence" – to use Emile Durkheim's term. On the other hand, and across cultures, improvisation has been perceived also as disturbing and perplexing, when not openly subversive.[1] The explication of the latter effect certainly depends on features that should be studied in context, but it is arguable that improvised action *by itself* does not fit squarely with the categories of activities that are paradigmatic and expressive of intentional and rational agency. In particular, it seems to lack altogether normative standards, e.g., standards of correctness or success, and bears a problematic relation to deliberation and rational planning. If an act is improvised how can it be deliberate? And if it is not deliberate, can it be a genuine expression of the exercise of intentional agency, something for which an actor can take full responsibility, and which represents his authentic self? Furthermore, improvised action has some paradoxical traits if intentional agency is understood to be agency based on reasons. It seems that the "reason for action" should be settled prior to the performance of the action itself. But an improvised action is, by definition, unprecedented, unplanned, and, thus, spontaneous in the primeval sense of the term. So, it remains unclear how improvisation pertains to intentional agency, and whether improvised dance belongs in the domain of action at all (cfr. Ryle 1966).

This chapter discusses butō dance as an example of improvisation that challenges not only some deeply entrenched philosophical definitions of improvisation, but also some current fundamental presumptions about self-government and agency in action theory. In the first part of the chapter, I identify the main features of butō improvisation, with regard to the nature of its basic movement, and the kind of subjectivity implicated in its generation. I then raise some questions regarding the philosophical characterization of this form of dance and, in the second part of the paper, I argue that butō improvisation undermines intuitive distinctions between "ordinary" and "specialized action," thereby eluding both the philosophical rationalistic theories of action as mediated by intentions, and the theories of arational action as expressive of individual subjectivity (Cfr. Hursthouse 1991). My claim is that butō can be better interpreted as a *shared* action that is neither mediated by intentions nor expressive of the individual self, but, rather, is meant to generate a community by sharing the experience of the living body.

This characterization has the advantage that it helps to put in the right perspective the puzzle about the normative standards of improvised action, which is addressed in the third part of the chapter. For many, improvisation *as such* undermines the very idea of a normative paradigm against

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which to evaluate possible solutions. In the case of butō, the absence of normative standards of action (e.g., success, correctness, or rightness) may be also connected to the absence of a subject in charge of her action. This is because butō improvisation does not count on the dancer as a predefined subject existing prior to and independently of her performance. In contrast to these interpretations, I hold that there are normative criteria for butō improvisation, which govern its explorative and generative functions through a training based on unselfing. This model turns away from the rhetoric of spontaneous free movements and the search for individual authenticity. It advocates for a model of intentional agency that it is not mediated by (individual or joint) intentions, but that aspires to generate a community by sharing the experience of a living emotional body.

1 The Body in the Dance of Darkness and Light

Butō is a Japanese dance that was elaborated in the Sixties, by Hijikata Tatsumi and Ōno Kazuo.[2] It is also known as the dance of darkness (*ankoku butō*), especially in relation to the tormented choreography of Hijikata Tatsumi's butō, though one should bear in mind that the dance celebrates death as part of life, the aspiration to truth, and the values of gratitude and communality.[3] While it may be a matter of discussion what the defining features of butō are, I will take the liberty of focusing on improvisation as its distinctive mark, because this aspect brings to the fore butō's decisive emphasis on the body being implicated in the generation of action.

Rather than young, gracious, and athletic bodies with unperturbed face expressions, the body of butō is fragile, though not imprecise. The dancer's muscles are visibly strained; his face is distorted by grief or ecstatic joy, impellent urges, and disturbing desires; the posture is difficult and unstable, swept away by disorienting forces. The expressive force of the dance does not build upon the sublime and controlled movements of a classic choreography, but upon instinctual emotional drives. In the first butō piece, *Forbidden Colors* (1959), Hijikata Tatsumi chose Ōno Yoshito the son of Kazuo, who had not completed his training as a modern dancer.[4] The rationale of this choice can be seen in the search for primeval acts that are not mannered and codified by aesthetic canons. The movements are imperfect in terms of technique or, rather, they are defiant of any technique as they are in search of an originality that cannot be codified, reproduced, and graded. The movements of the dance are not spectacular and do not celebrate the elegance of the body; rather, they are ordinary and tentative. Sometimes, they are ancestral postures, reminiscent of universal experiences of the living cycle, comprehending birth, life, and death, such as the fetal position adopted by Carlotta Ikeda in her solo *Utt*, [5] but also especially resonating with the grieving experience of living a maimed, ill, malformed body.

These features of butō challenge the traditional canon of beauty and composure associated with dance, but they also question the alleged ancillary role of dance in respect to music, and the narrative structure imposed by the choreography. In stark contrast with the normative standards of Western and Eastern dance, butō dancers do not seem to execute an intelligible choreography, instead stringing together a seemingly chaotic and disturbing redundancy of aimless and almost beastly moves, as in Hijikata Tatsumi's solo performance *The Rebellion of the Body* (1968).[6] Uncoordinated dancers build a broken narrative, composed of sparse gestures, which do not seem organized by any norm of integration and coherence. Yet, the gestures are in some sense powerful, precise, and fit, and reach out to the audience: how so?

It is tempting to conceive of butō improvisation as undisciplined, because it is unruly and builds on whimsical and idiosyncratic gestures. In fact, it takes discipline to let such instinctual drives emerge and overcome the postures, habits, customs, and etiquette associated with traditional dances. However, the relation to tradition is rather complex.[7] Butō draws on the significant legacy of other ancient forms of Japanese dance and theater, as well as echoing many strands of Western tradition. Butō dancers seem destitute and even aspire to marginalization, very much like *kabuki*

actors during the era Tokugawa. Ōno's *Argentina* (1974) borrows the costumes and attitudes of western opera,[8] which was known to the Japanese large public thanks to the musical theater introduced by Italian choreographer Giovanni Vittorio Rosi.[9] Ōno's repository of collective images of the frail and suffering body resonates with Christian images of an embodied god, borne out of the womb of a woman, taking upon himself the misery of humanity, and destined for a violent death. Some of the subversive aspects of butō fall easily into continuity with the European avant-garde, and in particular with the *Neue Tanz* inaugurated by Rudolph von Laban and Mary Wigman, which was introduced in Japan by Baku Ishii and Takaya Eguchi.[10] In a way, Ōno reiterates von Laban's dictum that "Everybody is a dancer" enacting a democratization of the body but also reaffirming the ancient idea of dance as a spiritual experience (Hoffman 1987: 76).

Before being an aesthetic category, "dance" is a sacred term. The body is the locus of the soul/mind, and not a mere instrument through which a choreography is executed (Ōno 1997: 170). The body of the butō dancer is frail, skinned, and almost unskilled. This image sharply challenges the stereotype of the powerful, perfectly shaped body of a ballet dancer, but it is reminiscent of the deprivations of the hermit (*senkotsu*).[11] Likewise, the elderly body of seventy-four-year-old Ōno in *Argentina* – half-naked and playing with old laces, attempting at jumps and arabesques, or keeping unstable operatic postures may be taken as pointing out a tragic model of decadent beauty, but it also borrows from theater *Nō*, in which the elder's dance (*Okina*) celebrates the accomplishments of a long and full life – something only the Master can perform (see D'Orazi 2001). But the way in which butō borrows from different sources is made peculiar by the distinctive way in which its audience is implicated in action, so that the symbolic effects of the moves are amplified: the white powered faces that populated traditional theater stages become lost souls covered in the atomic dust, for a post-atomic generation; the graceless, skinned bodies remind us of the bodies brutally starved and maimed by a senseless war.

Yet, butō masters do not choose improvisation with a polemical or political intent. In fact, to take at face value Ōno's remarks, they have *no intent* at all: dance is not an intentional enterprise, neither in its inception nor in terms of its deliverances. The body is not an instrument for communicating a message (e.g., the democracy of the body, or the accessibility of dance), nor is the dimension in which a specific political struggle takes place (e.g., the struggle to build a truly Japanese dance body). Unlike other kinds of theatrical performances, butō is not directed to the audience in the sense that it is not a performance aimed to amuse, outrage, or persuade its public. The masters insist that it is not *staged* but *shared*.

The acting body is a *living* body, not a performing one. Nonetheless, the dance is supposed to have some epistemic gains, since the sharing of the body is also the sharing of a hidden truth. This is because the body is conceived as the locus of the search of truth: it is what it is, and nothing else (Ōno 1997: 20). Its ordinary movements – such as ran, jump, turn, walk, rest, and sit – become ritual, and should be interpreted as ritual nodes, rather than as scattered acts. Ritualized movements are patterned, but they are not reproducible in the mechanical sense of the term. The patterns are inherent to the living body. Within this context, showing the elderly body, with its frailties and limitations, counts as *sharing* a living experience. Ōno's body is truthful, not exhibited or staged, but given to others and shared as a life experience. To take these bold proclaims at face value, we need to revisit the underlying concepts of action and agency.

2 The Springs of Action in Butō Improvisation

An understanding of the features of agency at work in butō can be gained by reviewing the process through which butō action is constructed. Coherently with the understanding of the body sketched in Section 1, the training deployed by butō masters is not a technique (Ōno 1986: 156). Ōno's distrust of technique is profound and justified on the basis of different considerations.

2.1 Codification as Artificiality

First of all, imposing a technique on the body amounts to adopting an artificial posture toward oneself and the world, which is not conducive to the search for truth. Artificial means not genuine, counterfeited, and hence fake. The technique makes the body something like an artifact, estranged from its "natural" state. We should be wary of the term natural, which is understood in different senses across time and cultures. In traditional Japanese culture, humanity belongs in a divine natural order. Nature is acknowledged the power of spontaneous generation, which is creative but does not have a personality or individual subjectivity.[12] The ambition of butō training is to recover natural powers, by setting aside movements that have been normalized and codified in tradition, and to reconnect with life. The recovery of such natural powers must be done without technique, which is understood to be conservative and such that it invites uniformity. The technique insists on the seriality of movements and the body memory of movements perfected over time. The refusal of technique is ultimately the refusal of procedural and standardized action. But it is also the refusal of relying on normalized relations among the sequences of movements. By contrast, the recommendation is to rescind such relations so that a sort of "illogical movement" emerges (Ōno 1997: 38). I take this to mean a movement that is not interpretable as belonging in the logic of action, by reference to reasons for action, intentions, and plans.

The second reason for rejecting technique has to do with emotions: emotions represent primary springs of action, in contrast to intentions and reasons. Perfecting a technique does not help one be true to one's own inner emotional drives. On the contrary, it can hide them. This is a particularly important reason to distrust technique. Emotions are the starting point, the materials from which dance action is built; they guide the construction of the artistic process, and importantly characterize the effect on the audience. This pervasive role of emotions can be clarified by reviewing improvisation exercises.

2.2 From Specialized Action to Self-transformation

By rejecting codified movements and insisting on live gestures, butō undermines the intuitive distinction between the ordinary and specialized forms of action such as dance. One should not be misled by the emphasis on the unskilled body of butō. Butō improvisation requires heavy training. The dancer works on himself,[13] and the improvisation training starts with emotions elicited by personal images. There is no sharp division between life and art, or between ordinary living and staged acting. I venture to say that the very notion of action does not admit to this division. On the other hand, both dimensions can be very confused and very far from truth. Thus, the sense in which one appeals to the repository of ordinary images does not indicate the aspiration to reproduce or mimic the ordinary. On the contrary, the appeal to the dancer's personal repository of imagines serves to build a new dimension of agency by raising a new level of awareness (Ōno 1997: 98). The improvisation exercise starts with a transfiguration of personal memory through which specific movements become universal ones.

The instructions of exercises are oxymoronic: they demand excellence in imperfect movements, inspired by the fragile, limited, faulted gestures of real life. Yet, dance does not aim at mimicking reality. Rather, the improvisation exercises are almost spiritual exercises that enable a progress in *unselfing*: leaving the self behind by making personal images into the images of life – or life as is. In fact, some of the exercises try to explore human desires from a non-human perspective. An exercise starts with visualizing the image of a fish. The smell of fish is imagined to arouse an animal desire in the fishermen as well as the bear of Hokkaido. Human desires are not considered raw materials, nor are they represented through one's own distinctive subjectivity: they are shown as shaped and bent by a perspective that is bound to misrepresent its objects (e.g., the

perspective of the Hokkaido bear desiring a fish). The point of the exercise is to transform the body into a body *driven* by deep-seated emotions through the patient deconstruction of an actual desire, aside from particular representations, e.g., through experiencing how difficult it is to understand desires aside from being human, or not.

Another exercise that may be taken as paradigmatic of unselfing requires dancers to adopt the posture of *dead eyes*. In this posture, the dancer's eyes are open but do not look. Their gaze is not directed outside in order to see something outside oneself. Instead, the gaze projects attention inward, rather than being directed at the outward world. It is the reflective stance on life, which is posited outside of it. The inward mode of acting changes the relation to the audience: rather than performing for an audience, dancers are focused on the action occurring in and among themselves (cf. Novack 1990: 128 f.; 1992: 43–50).

While there are some recurrent gestures and mimetic postures in improvisation, their role is to root the agent in his path of transformation. It is not a performance that is aimed at instructing, enflaming, or disconcerting the public. Dance shows the way, by uncovering the force of emotional drives, and making the audience aware of the instinctual forces of life (Ōno 1997: 150. Cf. Gunji 1970: 70). It is a spiritual journey shared with others. But audiences are not invited to join as fellow travelers; they are implicated in action, if the proclamations about sharing are to be taken seriously.

2.3 Criteria of Agential Authority

While these spiritual exercises are not codified, they certainly have normative force, that is, they contain normative criteria that guide dancers in their activity. Precision in action is essential, though it does not mean precision in the execution of a *pas de danse*. It is precision in doing what it is: sometimes it is the precision of a still, limping, crouched, or convulsively shaken body. Because of its emphasis on the lack of intentionality of these dance movements, butō raises questions about the purpose of the training and its normative criteria. In fact, butō dance seems to elude current philosophical conceptions of action.

Philosophical theories of action privilege activities authored by agents as exercises of autonomous self-government. While there are various definitions of autonomy and different philosophical proposals about the sort of self-government required for rational agency, there is a wide agreement that actions are *purposive*, that is, performed in view of an end, or in order to address an audience. Most philosophical theories of action emphasize the special relation of authority that agents have with their action, which it is generally conveyed in terms of reasons. Reasons for action make action intelligible to oneself and to others (Velleman 2009),[14] and justify agents in doing what they do (Korsgaard 2009). These philosophical theories take very seriously the idea that agency bears a special relation with subjectivity and that agential authority is a value to be preserved in action, as it is the key way in which agents can change the world according to their mind. The relevant agent is a subject endowed with distinctive rational and emotional capacities, through which he/she plans his/her life. Intentional action is understood to bear the mark of the agent – to show where "the agent stands." Likewise, shared action is mostly understood as mediated by intentions and plans (Korsgaard 2009; Velleman 2009; Bratman 2018). We can join others in action by sharing intentions with them, that is, by forming a collective intention to act together.

2.4 Revisiting the Springs of Action

These philosophical characterizations of action and shared action are unfit for butō, and it is interesting to consider what follows from this mismatch. First of all, butō improvisation does not conceive of the dancer as a predefined subject existing prior to and independently of her performance

(Hashimoto 1993; Greiner 2002). Thus, under this description, it is unclear how butō action is somebody's *doing*, something that can be ascribed to dancers as their responsibility. Ōno's recurring declarations suggest that dance should renounce the claim of expressing the actor's own emotions and responsibility, and refrain from intellectualized forms of predetermined symbolic acts. While the activity of dancing itself is supposed to increase awareness, it does not amount to an intellectual act of self-monitoring. The suppression of subjectivity that is recommended in the exercises of unselfing described in Section 2.2 is importantly related to the refusal of some canonical representation of self-conscience, which divides the agent into acting self and observer. In contrast to the philosophical understanding of self-reflection, butō increases self-awareness by overcoming the distinction between the reflective self and the active self within the reflective conscience. Second, the relevant sort of agency at work in butō improvisation is not exercised through the subject's volitional control. This is the reason why Ōno remarks that butō should not be characterized as an intentional activity.

The first step to unpack this declaration is to correctly identify the springs of action in butō improvisation. This form of action is not conceived as a process starting with "intentions to be realized" or "desires to be fulfilled." Rather, action springs as part of sequences driven by emotional forces deprived of any individual subjectivity. The dancer is acted upon by such forces, rather than being in charge of them. This is the sense in which butō action is understood to be "part of life" (Ōno 1995: 15–23). While action is not authored in the egocentric sense of the term, it is also not an expression of anyone's own subjectivity, e.g., expressive of one's own emotional states. The expression of the actor's emotions is an important part of his training but it takes place in the body: emotions are not mental states, but are, rather, primarily embodied dynamics, which may be elicited to drive a communal motion.

The identification of the springs of action with impersonal emotional forces, outside of the individual volitional control may seem to cohere with the definition of butō as "nonintentional."[15] But it is unclear how something for which the actor undergoes a training so similar to a spiritual exercise can be unintentional. Besides, isn't the emotional training part of the process through which butō action is produced? In Section 3, I will argue that this difficulty can be solved by distinguishing between the intentionality of the activity and the claim that the springs of action are emotional drives rather than intentions or reasons that explain and justify the action. The purpose of this section is to clarify in what sense butō refocuses on emotions as the primary springs of action, and how this is in stark contrast to current action theory.

2.5 A Distinctive Account of Agency

One may object that the contrast conceptualized in Section 2.4 can be avoided by conceiving dance's aims as expressing emotions.[16] But this answer cannot be correct in the case of butō dance. Unlike other contemporary conceptions of improvisation, butō dance is not expressive. Its function is not to let subjective emotions out, but to share them, separate from subjectivity. The emphasis is not on the subject's need or entitlement to express their state of mind.

The latter claim supports an interpretation of the conception of butō action that is profoundly alien to the conceptions that are alive in contemporary action theory. First, the action is *not expressive* in the sense that expresses emotions inside out.[17] The expressive aspect may be present, but it is not the defining mark of butō action. Second, the dance is *not representative* in that it does not follow *mimetic* patterns (such as the dance that represents animal steps, or that personifies emotions). Third, it is *not theatrical or performative*, in that the dancer is not primarily a performer that executes a choreography in order to entertain a public. Four, it is not *didactic or demonstrative*, in that it is not initiated by the agent in order to educate the audience, e.g., teaching body acceptance, limitations, or the democratization of the body. Finally, it is not a *communicative* act, though it is meant to share an experience; this last assertion requires some explaining.

In improvisation training, novices are asked to take hints from their own emotions as building blocks to construct dialogues, in full awareness of the personalities of the interlocutor and of the audience. None of these elements are the constitutive aims of improvisation, so it would not be correct to say that improvisation aims to address the audience or to involve the partner in dialogue. The purpose of the exercise is to refine the actor's capacity to adjust to circumstances and identify appropriate opportunities of action. It is arguable that such refinement goes through a dialogical understanding of the context, that is, a relation in which the agent is open to the external world. In contrast, in butō improvisation, the audience is not openly addressed. Thus, the structure of the relation is not *communicative*, in that the dancer is facing an audience, but does not try to communicate or establish a point, nor does she try to have an effect on them. Dance is not instrumental to the cognitive contents being communicated, nor is it persuasive. The dancer is said to be sharing his experience as a living body. To this extent, the dance makes available and accessible to dancer and audience alike contents and emotions that otherwise remain hidden or inchoate. But the suggestion is not that the dance merely conveys the cognitive contents that are there to be known prior to and independently of its artistic manifestation. On the contrary, butō makes the effort of shaping some emotional recess and disciplining it, while remaining noncommittal to any educational or demonstrative aims. To refocus on the body as the locus of emotions is not to say that the body is the means to reveal the emotions as modes of discernment, and that improvisation is an epistemic tool, even though there are some epistemic gains in practicing as well as in watching butō dance.

Such gains are better illustrated by noticing that the butō dancer must comply with discipline, and that he trains by studying his body and its movements. The discipline is both physical and mental/spiritual, and consists of disassociating the body from social images that are superimposed on it, including imagines of the individual self, beauty, and choreographic coherence. It is a discipline that does not distrust the body as an obstacle to meaningful agency, but refocuses on the body as the seat of generating powers in action. So, there are normative criteria of success in butō dance, though they cannot be captured in terms of its performative effects. This definition may help solve a puzzle about the lack of intentionality as preempting normative standards, which I shall consider next.

3 The Puzzle of the Normative Standards of Action in Butō Improvisation

The springs of action in butō improvisation are emotional drives that bypass volitional control and, to this extent, means that butō is quite unlike activities based on reasons or mediated by intentions. However, such emotional drives are retrieved to consciousness, and channeled in action through training that bears a striking resemblance to spiritual exercises of unselfing. This is a puzzle for action theory because the availability of normative criteria of success is generally related to intentional activities.

It may seem that this puzzle applies to any form of improvisation. In some prominent philosophical views, such as Nelson Goodman's, it is improvisation as such that undermines the very idea of a normative paradigm against which to evaluate possible solutions, precisely because it does not rely on regular patterns of pre-defined norms (Goodman 1976: 32 f.). This approach sees improvisation as radically deviating from deliberate action. Improvisation dance is often defined in terms of absence of deliberation, and it is precisely the lack of deliberation that allows for the utilization of intuitive resources of the mind and body. Deliberation is understood to be an obstacle to creativity and spontaneity, and intrinsically conservative in that it favors uniformity. In contrast to deliberation, improvisation is praised for the power to invent new forms spontaneously, create uncharted interactions among the dancers, and "break the causal chain between existing conventions and new developments in an artistic practice" (Carter 2010: 181).

My claim is that this is a mischaracterization of improvisation, which thrives on some overlapping misunderstandings about intentional agency, and equivocal notions of deliberation, spontaneity, and creativity. Reflection on butō practice may help us better characterize the relation between deliberation, intentionality, and improvisation. Given the peculiarities of butō dance evidenced in Sections 1 and 2, the alleged lack of normative standards may be connected to two distinctive features of butō dance. First, the centrality given to the body and, correspondingly, the displacement of individual subjectivity make it difficult to conceive of butō action in terms of purposive execution of an intention, or the fulfillment or expression of a desire.[18] Second, while dance is a specialized domain of action, butō masters insist on normalized dance movements on the model of ordinary actions, and a normalized body, with no preference for body type, gender, or age. This normalization contributes to confounding the normative criteria under which butō is (to be) evaluated. The rejection of the classification of butō in terms of expressive, mimetic, didactic, and communicative actions make it difficult to recover the normative standard of the discipline. If butō is not a theatrical performance like other forms of dance, and its movements are not governed by a specialized aesthetic code, because they consist of walking, falling, lifting, and other everyday movements – what is the ground of its normative standard?[19]

This question arises especially for those who understand a normative standard to be a norm that applies to a domain of action and guides agents in their doings. There is a general consensus that in order to account for actions as opposed to natural events and other things that happen to human bodies, one has to focus on subjects as intentional agents, capable of authorizing actions and acting for a reason and, *therefore*, subject to normative standards of practical rationality. According to theories of volitional or psychological control, an agent is responsible for an action when it is under his volitional or psychological control, e.g., when he could have chosen or willed otherwise. In this debate, actions are expressive of (rational and intentional) agency when they are chosen on the basis of reasons, where this means them being in accordance with appropriate desires and beliefs (Davidson 1963), that are based on reasons that everyone can share (Korsgaard 2009), that are wholeheartedly endorsed (Frankfurt 1988), or that are planned (Bratman 2007, 2018). These theories assume, one way or another, that agents take charge of the action by exerting a form of normative guidance or willpower, even though they disagree about how to understand normative guidance and what follows from it.

In Section 2, I argued that none of these models seem to be helpful in characterizing the sort of action and agency at stake in butō. But I also suggested that there must be normative standards that guide dancers in their dance. Thus, it is important to consider more precisely how butō challenges current models of action and shared agency. In butō, the subjectivity of the agent does not take center-stage and the question of agential authority on action does not arise. In fact, one may say that the preparation process that leads to butō improvisation is meant to *de-authorize* the dancer. This is because such preparation processes seem to undermine all the usual ways in which subjects take charge of their actions: by ensuring volitional or psychological control or through normative guidance. In the theory of normative guidance, agents act on the basis of reasons that they accept or to which they respond insofar as they are rational. According to rationalistic theories, the success of an action is governed by rational standards, and such standards are normative and partly constitutive of rational agency (Korsgaard 2009). In contrast, in butō the subject is not the author of the action but *its limit*. While in other forms of dance the body is an obstacle or an instrument for the free expression of subjectivity, in butō the reverse relation holds: it is individual subjectivity that should be singled out as an obstacle to the body. The actor must learn how to stay within the body by exhibiting its limits or forcing its boundaries, e.g., moving the body in a way that is aimless rather than merely idle, that is, purpose-less, rather than molded on preexisting functionalities.

Many may go along with Goodman's contention about the lack of normative standards in improvised art, and say that butō does not fit the mold of action theory because such theory applies exclusively to intentional agency. However, it is not clear that butō is an unintentional activity, and my claim is that the grounds for rejecting the general framework of action theory are subtler and more interesting: they concern the very source of agential authority.

To begin with, it is useful to distinguish between actions and dance. As a dance, butō is a complex diachronic activity that extends over time, from the training to the eventual performance. Understood in its diachronic aspect, it is hard to deny that butō is an intentional activity, though particular segments of it are not. It is more accurate to say that, as a dance, butō comprises act that are not intentional. But this feature does not make butō particularly special. Any activity that extends over time comprises segments that are not intentional, but also consists of automatic and routine acts, latency, and stalemates (Ferrero 2010). This complexity is what requires the "theoretical presence of the agent": the agent is the deliberative unit that coordinates and integrates movements and actions into an activity that extends over time (Bratman 2007; Korsgaard 2009).

Philosophers have focused on the value of diachronic will in terms of the volitional capacities that enable us to commit to action over time, avoid distractions, overcome obstacles, and take opportunities (Ferrero 2009). Some have argued, in line with a long-standing tradition, that it is precisely the diachronic will that preserves human agency from the tyranny of the present, and that allows humans to commit to distant objects through future-directed intentions. The human mind is particularly subjected to the prompts of the present, especially in the deliberative perspective. Sometimes the deliberative salience of the present context distracts us from long-term commitments and obligations, and builds upon a form of temporal bias (Elster 1979). The diachronic will needs to conform to norms that react against such temporal bias to avoid practical irrationality.

Butō swims in the opposite direction by fighting the ambition to coordinate the future. Its dance evokes and builds upon images of the past but is driven by occurrent emotions and does not have any ambition to extend to a distant future.[20] Thus, butō challenges the models of action not because it is not intentional, but because it does not recognize the need of a diachronic will, and does not endorse self-governing agency over time. Precisely for this reason, butō turns away from the rhetoric of spontaneous free movements and the search for individual authenticity.[21] Deliberate action does not exclusively indicate action done on the basis of reasons, or as a result of conscious processes of reasoning. Deliberate movements are not necessarily codified: they may be unplanned but may result from mutual adjustment, exploit shared feedbacks, and build upon complex activities such as risk-taking actions and spatial disorientation.[22] The capacities that are activated in deliberation are the very same that are activated in improvisation. In fact, it is arguable that practical deliberation requires improvisational skills (Rorty 2000). These are understood as skills that enable the agent to exploit contextual features as opportunities of action. They should be understood broadly as skills that rely on multilayered competences concerning situational and interactional aspects of the context. On the basis of these considerations, I submit that butō maintains some significant traits of intentionality, even though it is not composed of sequences of discrete intentional actions and is recognizable driven by the emotions.

The combination of these two claims makes butō the perfect candidate for the category of *arational actions*. According to Rosalind Hursthouse, arational actions comprise intentional actions explained by occurrent emotion (Hursthouse 1991: 57). In her view, "these actions threaten the standard account […] by undercutting the false semantic theory that holds that account in place" (Hursthouse 1991: 57).[23] There are three necessary conditions for arational action. An action is considered arational if, and only if: (i) the action was *intentional*; (ii) the agent did not do the action for a reason; and (iii) in the case that the agent was not *in the grip of an emotion*, she would not have acted. Actions such as shouting at objects because of anger, running or jumping for joy, or tearing

one's clothes out of grief count as arational actions (Hursthouse 1991: 59, 60).[24] This category is proposed as an alternative to Donald Davidson's standard theory of action, but it can be contrasted with the prevailing theories of action referred to above, insofar as they privilege actions based on reasons and mediated by intentions.

The third element in Hursthouse's definition represents emotions as states that may govern the agent. Arguably, while in the grip of the emotion the agent does not have authority over his action. For some, at least in some cases, emotions, are irresistible forces that determine the will and that represent volitional necessities. It is an open question whether an agent who is completely determined by his emotion is autonomous: he may be, if he endorses such a determination wholeheartedly (Frankfurt 1988) or reflectively (Korsgaard 1996). Likewise, an agent that acts in the grip of an emotion may still be said to maintain some form of self-governance, even though not under the guise of rational self-governance.

Furthermore, emotions may be recognized as having an intentionality of their own, e.g., because and insofar as they are directed at an audience. When discussing the springs of improvised action, we talked of emotions as elicited by personal images. The training consists of enacting or re-enacting the emotions, according to an associative model in which present emotional states are induced by the involuntary activation of past emotion-laden memories though associative processing mechanisms. The induction by meaningful imaginaries seems to bypass the normative criteria of assessment. Arguably, the induction happens without any voluntary or conscious awareness of the link between the image and the reaction. However, proper training consists in a special way in which some emotions are put to work in the specific context,in which the dance creates a community by sharing a living experience.

The interpretation of butō action as shared while also not being mediated by intentions is particularly helpful in this regard, and it helps connect the relevance of dance to the development of social bonds. In this perspective, even the alleged absence of a goal-directed activity in butō can be questioned, for instance, by referring to the adaptive role of dance in furthering non-linguistic and emotional forms of understanding, communication, and social cognition.[25] However, this connection must be qualified, since butō provides a complex case in which the relation between actors and audience does not exploit the mechanism of empathy or sympathy. Sharing the experience of a living body does not always take the form of sympathizing with the actor impersonating an emotion, or putting himself in the other's shoes. For instance, the butō dancer often insists on grotesque postures to block sympathy and alienate the audience as a key mechanism of the dance, though this is not properly described as a task or an expedient.[26] Nor is the social bond to be understood as one of harmony or complicity in action. Rather, the claim is that butō is an agential mode such that actors and audience construct a shared world of salience, through embodied-emotional interactions. This modality of shared agency has been kept at the margins of the philosophical debate, which privileges action shared through the sharing of intentions or reasons.

The construction of action in butō is shared only to the limited extent that the parties participate in an interaction. As in other forms of improvised dance, individual impromptu variations may depend on the reactions and feedbacks of the audience, even though the focus is kept inward (Carter 2010: 184). The "dead eyes" of the dancer remind the audience that his gaze is inward rather than outward: he is not reaching out in order to amuse or to entertain them, but to share with them the experience of living. Whether this sharing is sufficient to create or reinforce stable social bonds is unclear, but it may still play a crucial role in the process of participatory sense-making (cf. De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007), and in some cases improvisation may include communal decision-making between the actors and the audience.

There is enough here to differentiate between butō and ritual dances that are practiced as ways of expressing or reinforcing social bonds and the sense of belonging to the same community. The unconventional relationship with the audience leads to a different understanding of community

building: the audience is drawn into the experience, so that there is sharing rather than showing. The experience of the living body is shared together with the audience, rather than being observed by spectators. The focus on the efforts of the body is a feature of butō that sets it apart from ballet, for instance. While in ballet the effort is concealed, in butō it is shared with the audience. The concealment of the effort could be plausibly understood as a way of not relating to the audience and creating a work-like appearance.[27] I have argued that the focus on the efforts of the body, deprived from subjectivity can be seen also as a model of shared agency that has not been contemplated by prominent philosophical theories of action.[28]

4 Conclusion

This chapter argues that butō refocuses on the body in a distinctive way, as divorced from subjectivity, and brings to the fore interesting issues about the source of agential authority and the normative standards of improvised action. In current action theory, shared agency is understood to be mediated by intentions and reasons. Butō represents a category of action that maintains some features of intentionality, though it is not grounded on intentions or reasons. It requires a normative training based on unselfing, which enables dancers to attain at their emotional powers and share their emotional experience, thereby directly implicating the audience in action.[29]

Notes

1 The orgiastic dance for Dionysus and Cybele was considered unruly and upsetting and, thus, unsuited for Greek citizens whose distinctive virtues required the balanced dominance of reason. On the connection between Dionysian and improvisation, see Plato, *Ion*, 534E–535B. On the problematic status of dance in Plato, see Fraleigh 1987: 10, 27. On mimesis in art, and in relations to various life forms, see Nehamas 1999 and Lezsl 2006.

2 On the history and legacy of butō from a multidisciplinary perspective, see Baird and Candelario 2019.

3 This interpretation is particularly apt for characterizing Kazuo Ōno's understanding of dance, and resonates with his Christian values. The dance bears the suffering of the world, but grief is paired with ecstatic joy, see Ōno 1997: 144, Ōno 1989, 1999; Ōno et al. 1994; Ōno and Ōno 2004. Cfr. Greiner 2002, Kennedy 1995; Schechner 1986.

4 This is based on the novel of the same name by Yukio Mishima. It ends with Yoshito apparently killing a chicken, which leads to the banning of Hijikata from the festival and establishing him as an iconoclast. Cfr. Fraleigh and Nakamura 2006.

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7cQ_oD8hvqI (accessed October 25, 2020).

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hNV0T5zI7VI (accessed October 25, 2020).

7 On the aspiration of butō to transgress boundaries and build bridges, see Fraleigh 1999: 2.

8 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rk5_Kc2BDQg (accessed October 25, 2020).
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4LRIQetJODY (accessed October 25, 2020).

9 On the operatic traits of Ōno's butō, see Boué 1986. Naomi Matsumoto argues that the operatic products diffused in Japan thanks to the mediation of Giovanni Vittorio Rosi were not faded copies of the Western tradition, but, rather, took a life of their own and constitute a forceful attempt of "syncultural construction," see Matsumoto 2017. Cf. Blakeley 1988.

10 In 1933, Ōno studied creative dance with Baku Ishii who had trained in the USA with Isadora Duncan; and in 1936, Ōno studied with Takaya Eguchi, son of Masao and Seiko Takada, who had learned dance with Giovanni Vittorio Rosi, see D'Orazi 2001. Perhaps, butō represents a more significant rupture *within* Japanese culture, considering that it was acknowledged in Japan only after being welcome in Paris: the first festival butō in Tokyo dates back to 1986. On the expectations about the avant-garde, see Herridge 1969.

11 See Gunji 1988: 95; cf. Ichikawa 1989; Schechtener 1986: 165; Centonze 2001, D'Orazi 2001.

12 The term *shizen* – in the Miji era (1868–1912) – could be translated as "nature" in contrast to what is artificial, but it is not deprived of creative powers and, thus, can be understood to be include human capacity to create art.

13 I noticed several analogies with Stanislavskij's method, see Stanislavskij 1988; Cfr. Magarshack 1950.

> For in the process of action the actor gradually obtains the mastery over the inner incentives of the actions of the character he is representing, evoking in himself the emotions and thoughts which resulted in those actions. In such a case, an actor not only understands his part, but also feels it, and that is the most important thing in creative work on the stage
>
> (quoted in Magarshack 1986: 375)

14 Velleman does use improvisation to explain how social coordination happens, but his aim is to emphasize the deliberative skills at play in negotiation. Cf. also Rorty 2000.

15 Improvisation is often understood in contrast to non-intentionality: "sensing, rather than preset intentions, provides the desired motivation for the dance movements" (Carter 2010: 186).

16 In comparison with poetry, dance is understood to be in function to express truthful emotions. See Haerdter and Kawai 1988: 9.

17 I think this is an element of butō improvisation that sets it aside from the performances of *Neue Tanz*, in which the expressivist conception of dance action is more at home.

18 "The artifice of performance has been reevaluated in that action, or what one does, is more interesting and important than the exhibition of character and attitude, and that action can be best focused on through the submerging of the personality; so ideally […] one is a neutral 'doer'" (Reiner 1974: 64).

19 This is a recurring trait of the avant-garde:

> The display of technical virtuosity and display of dancer's specialized body no longer make any sense. Dancers have been driven to search for an alternative context that allows for a more matter-of fact, more concrete, more banal quality of the physical being in performance, a context wherein people are engaged in actions and movements making a less spectacular demand on the body and in which skills is hard to locate.
>
> (Reiner 1974: 65)

20 On how consciousness is *supported by images,* see Paxton 1993: 63.

21 By contrast, see: Carter 2010; Novack 1990; Paxton 1993: 63; Reiner 1974.

22 For instance, in contact improvisation:

> each party of the duet freely improvises with an aim to working along the easiest pathways available to their mutually moving masses. […] Within this flexible framework of shape, speed, orientation, and personal details of the relationship are left to the dancers who, however, hold the ideal of active, reflexive, harmonic, spontaneous, mutual forms.
>
> (Paxton 1975: 40)

23 For another taxonomy that allows for actions driven by emotional to be also intentional, cf. Chan 1995.

24 According to Hursthouse, arational actions are explained by desires, rather than beliefs, since the beliefs associated with the action (e.g., shouting at objects) would be absurd (e.g., believing to have an effect on objects?). I take emotions to be different from desires, and so I do not find this way of understanding arational actions particularly illuminating. Recent studies have worked on the hypothesis that group dancing involves exertive synchronized movement to music and plays a role in social bonding, potentially via the release of endorphins, which are analgesic and reward-inducing, and have been implicated in primate social bonding, see Tarr et al. 2015.

25 There are several models of emotions as springs of action, and we should be reluctant to explain the relation in purely mechanistic and inductive terms, see Bagnoli, forthcoming.

26 There might be a tension between actors and their audience: audiences may feel alienated and confused as to their role with respect to the dance (Carter 2010: 188).

27 Interestingly, in ballet, the naturalness of the movement is made dependent on the concealment of the effort: the movement must flow effortlessly: "this is true art," Ursula Hageli, describing the Cecchetti method, in *Ballet Evolved Cecchetti* (Royal Opera House): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mG-1WuZViibU (accessed October 24, 2020). Cf. "The limbs are never in a fixed, still relationship and they are stretched to their fullest extension only in transit, creating the impression that the body is constantly engaged in transition" (Rainer 1974: 66–7).

> Phrasing is thus concealed from the viewers while the actual energy required to perform the tasks is visible to the audience. Performers avoid confronting the audience in order to create a work-like appearance as opposed to initiating a conventional theatrical relationship between performers and the audience.
>
> (Carter 2010: 186)

28 While the sciences of social cognition have identified emotions as sources of shared and collective agency, the philosophical debate is still organized around the model of intentions, see Jancovic and Kirk 2018. Recent studies are limited to the possibility of shared emotions (Salmela and Nagatsu 2017), the mechanism of emotions (Pacherie 2018, Gentsch and Synofzik (2014), and rationalization (Döring 2003). In a debate more directly affected by empirical sciences, the epidemiological model of emotional contagion has prevailed, but this concept is insufficient to usefully discriminate different forms of shared agency by emotional resonance (Bagnoli, forthcoming). Phenomenological studies offer a more accurate account of the varieties of emotional resonance, but they focus on subjectivity and empathy, and have not addressed the issue of the sources of authority, see León et al. 2019. Enactivism points to a more promising direction in that it studies cognition by paying attention to the reciprocal causal interactions between brain, body, and environment as they dynamically unfold over time, see, e.g., Gallagher 2005, 2017: chapter 5; De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007; Colombetti 2014; cf. Bagnoli, forthcoming.

29 Earlier versions of this chapter have been discussed at the Conference of the *British Society for Aesthetics* on Aesthetics, Normativity and Reasons at the University of Kent at Canterbury in 2015, and at a workshop on improvisation at the University of Udine in 2015. I would like to thank these audiences and, in particular, Mirio Cosottini, Simon Kirchin, Glenn Most, and Michael Smith. I am also grateful to Consuelo Cellai to whom I owe my encounter with butō in the summer of 2012.

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STAGE IMPROVISATION IN THE COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

Domenico Pietropaolo

1 Introduction

In a memorable scene of Goldoni's *Il servitore di due padroni* (*The Servant of Two Masters*), Truffaldino attempts to get himself out of trouble by improvising an exculpatory narrative, constructing it piece by piece, in a series of quick answers to the questions fired at him by his master. The story that he weaves together as he speaks is quite complex, including, as it does, the creation of another master and another servant and organizing the incidents into a succession of implications that eventually result in the difficult situation that Truffaldino finds himself in at the moment. Obviously proud of his talent, he turns to the audience, as if to let them in on a secret, and tells them – in a stage whisper in Venetian – that he says whatever comes to his lips: "digo quel che me vien alla bocca" (Goldoni 1967: 3.2, 84). This delightful aside represents a metatheatrical moment in which the character, mimicking the actor Antonio Sacchi, who was actually improvising his role on stage, focuses the attention of the audience on the concept of speech improvisation at the heart of the play and of the Commedia dell'Arte tradition to which it belongs, and cites a definition of it that had enjoyed great currency since Classical times: "quidquid in buccam venit." Sacchi and Goldoni probably first encountered the expression in Andrea Perrucci's treatise on acting, *Dell'arte rappresentativa premeditata ed all'improviso* (*A Treatise on Acting from Memory and by Improvisation*, 1699: 101), though it had been in circulation at least since Cicero (*Ad Atticum* 13.1) as a cliché of the theory of improvisation, which could be used either to praise the practice for the creativity that it entailed or to denigrate it for its disregard of pre-established rules of form. Truffaldino appropriates it to point out his creativity as it unfolds simultaneously with Sacchi's display of his own, which he practices in giving aesthetic body to Truffaldino's.

My purpose in this chapter is to examine the theory, practice, and aesthetics of stage improvisation in the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, a dramatic form that flourished from the mid-16th to the mid-18th century approximately, at first in Italy but later also in various countries with different theatrical cultures. Commedia-style improvisation – of which Sacchi, commonly known as Truffaldino Sacchi, was perhaps the last and most distinguished representative – was not a preparatory exercise designed to create a script for performance or to add performative details to one already written, but the creation of text directly on stage in actual performance. This type of improvisation has a complex history and covers works produced in a large range of social and artistic contexts, including not only the plebeianism of the entertainment industry, with which it is too frequently associated but also the most refined forms of the dramatic arts. Working only with representative primary sources and with the aid of modern critical categories, I examine

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the contemporary understanding of stage improvisation, focusing on the role of memory and the imagination, discussing its ontology, the dynamic structure of its creativity, and, finally, its claim to aesthetic status.

2 The Ontology of Characters and Text

The original version of *The Servant of Two Masters* included a few scenes per act, mostly speeches for the serious roles, the *innamorati,* while the rest was in the form of a scenario containing a brief outline of the action, scene by scene. Goldoni wrote it in 1745 for Antonio Sacchi, who had asked him for a scenario on that very subject that would enable him to display his virtuosic ability as an improvisatory player. Goldoni watched him and his troupe improvise the play and was so impressed with their accomplishment that, in 1753, he wrote out the play in full, reproducing as much as possible what was done on stage by Sacchi and his actors. Other companies of less talented actors also performed it by improvisation, but their achievement was well below the performances by Sacchi's troupe, distorting Goldoni's theme in the process.[1] That was one of the factors that prompted Goldoni to publish *The Servant of Two Masters* as a full script. The play is hence a good point of access to some of the principal aspects of stage improvisation, giving us a glimpse of how it was practiced by one of the most talented troupes of improvisatory players in the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, as perceived by a careful and highly qualified observer.

The metatheatrical scene cited above, by no means the only moment of this kind in the play, raises two questions about improvisation that are central to our treatment of the theme in this chapter. The first is the question of the ontology of the character in relation to the actor impersonating him. To what extent is one separable from the other in an act of improvisation? On the theoretical plane, the distinction is easy to draw, and the separation is as automatic as it is in the performance of scripted drama, but on the experiential aesthetic plane, when the improvisation is actually in progress and experienced as ephemeral living theatre, we can just as easily distinguish the character from the actor, but we cannot so easily separate them without dissolving away the improvised text, which is itself the work of art. We cannot consider the improvised text independently, as if the improviser were an extrinsic agent engaged in making visible by neutral means the aesthetic essence of the scene from Goldoni's scenario. On the contrary, Goldoni provided the thematic content of the scene, but Sacchi gave it material articulation developing it into a verbal and gestural narrative, which is to say as an aesthetic object endowed with semantic fullness, and he did so in a manner that reflected his style, his technique, and his skill. With a different group of actors, the audience would have witnessed the development of an entirely different text and not a different performance of a pre-existing text.

The actor of improvised drama impersonates a character by giving his entire person to the ontology of the fictional character. In this context, "person" refers to the actor's artistic individuality and his professional persona at the same time. It is a concept that, alongside the actor's body and inventiveness, also includes the performance style, technical training, and experience that make his embodiment of the character distinctively his own. The work of art improvised as a performance text carries an indelible mark of the uniqueness of the improviser. The character of Truffaldino was conceived by Goldoni as an imaginary servant, albeit in the model of the type that Sacchi was already famous for impersonating, but it was Sacchi who first gave Goldoni's concept full aesthetic being on stage, and he did so by lending the character his body, his voice, his memory, and his imagination. Goldoni recognized the aesthetic excellence of the performance text created on the basis of his scenario, going as far as to say that the improvisatory players accomplished more than what he could do by scripting out the play in full.[2] Not everyone who attempted the role was as successful, and that, says Goldoni, is the reason why he decided to write out the play in full. He did not wish to impose his script on the actors but simply to offer it to other actors as a guide based

on proven excellence. He did not write out the text in full in order to force the actors to recite it as they received it, but only to offer them a set of guidelines, recognizing that some actors might indeed be able to generate a better text with their art of improvisation.[3]

Not all improvisatory players, however, could lay a legitimate claim to the world of art; many remained immersed in the entertainment industry and were not able to rise above its low bar. Just as there were a few great and many mediocre practitioners of the other fine arts, there were also many improvisers of dubious ability and aesthetic vision, actors whose performance creativity had no artistic significance. Yet the virtuosos of stage improvisation are not any different from the virtuosos of musical performance or dance, and their performance by improvisation did not have a weaker claim to artistic status. Goldoni, who would later devote much energy to the defeat of improvisatory practices, readily acknowledged the aesthetic distinction of which some players were capable – whether like Sacchi, they improvised the role of their character in its entirety, or like some other members of the cast, they used improvisation to integrate the scenes already scripted in the text.

This brings us to the second question suggested by Truffaldino's metatheatrical comment, and that is the question of the ontology of the improvised performance text. It is convenient to approach this by first clarifying the notion of performance text as such, improvised or otherwise. We can envision performance as a text written on a simple three-line staff. On the first line, we have the idea of the play or its dramatic action, organized into a plot and arranged as a sequence of acts and scenes. On the second line, we find the verbal articulation of the action, including speeches and authorial stage directions, as given in a script. On the third line, we find the embodiment of the verbal substance of the second line, namely facial and vocal gestures, expressive use of the body, proxemic relations among the performers, and the relationship with the audience, all of which could be described in detailed stage directions, additional to the authorial ones, some of which are routinely recorded in the stage manager's promptbook. The audience sees only the third line of the performance text. Interested critics among them may read it regressively, going to the second and first lines behind it, in their analysis of the play as a living performance. From the performance itself, however, they should not be able to tell whether any or all of the performance text was improvised or acted from a script.

This regressive approach to the performance text enables us to construct a structured ontology of dramatic improvisation as a network of categories that can be usefully invoked in an examination of its textuality. Given the ephemeral nature of improvisation and the generally unrecorded process followed by performers in its realization, such a network of concepts is eminently necessary. The regressive view of performance textuality suggests dividing the improvised textuality into three categories of plays, depending on the degree of improvisation entailed by the performance text.

In the first category are plays that are fully improvised, those that, in the 16th and 17th centuries, troubled the authorities because the performance text could easily elude the board of censors. Before the performance, there was no script to check for religious, moral, and political acceptability. If the actors improvise, if they do not perform *ex scripto*—asked in his *Della christiana moderatione del theatro* (*A Treatise on the Christian Moderation of the Theatre,* 1652) the Jesuit Giovanni Domenico Ottonelli, a self-appointed guardian of stage decency and decorum (Ottonelli 1652: 294)—how can the censors scrutinize what they say for errors and improprieties ? Since the performance text was authored directly by the actors while they were performing it, it was difficult to bring legal action against them on the basis of the text itself, because by the time the authorities arrived, there was no textual evidence to collect. The ontology of a play in this category is quite simple: the only mode of textual existence available to it is improvised performance textuality. The cast work with pre-established constraints and finality, but their verbal and gestural expressions have no prior existence in writing as a performance text in latency. This is true even when

the performance includes citations from, and allusions to, published plays, because such expressions are treated by the actors as part of the gestural and verbal material available to them for their construction of an original performance text. Examples of plays in this category abound in the Commedia dell'Arte tradition. In all such cases, the textual ontology of the plays is singular because performance textuality is the only mode of existence available to them.

With reference to this category of dramatic improvisation, the Peircean metaphysical distinction between type and token – frequently invoked in the ontological examination of the performing arts – is an irrelevant paradigm, since no textual duality is involved. The ontology of an impromptu dramatic scene has much in common with the ontology of musical improvisation, particularly jazz, in regards to which the type-tokens duality has been shown to be totally inadequate (Bertinetto 2012: 110–3). In purely improvised drama, the inadequacy is even more conspicuous, since the players do not have a dramatic score on which to improvise or which to personalize with unique embellishments. By itself, the scenario has no status either as the equivalent of a score or as a work of art of any kind, which is the reason why it was not published independently and marketed as reading material. The only thing that pre-exists the performance and given in the scenario is a breakdown of the dramatic action, organized into acts and scenes – a breakdown that is no more than a set of thematic and dramatic constraints for the performers. And since the scenario is not altered in performance, there is no improvisation on the first imaginary line of the performance text. The dialogue envisaged on the second line and the gestural language found on the third line are composed entirely by the players in the act of performing them. In an analysis of this kind of improvised textuality, which is typical of much of the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, the Peircean paradigm is of no value, and its application would, without doubt, lead to errors and misconceptions.

The second category includes plays with scripts that have been intentionally left incomplete by the playwright, though in a form that would not impede their enjoyment as literature. The degree of incompleteness can vary considerably, from a single scene to a succession of scenes in each act and all the speeches of the same character throughout the play. The ten fables for the theatre by Carlo Gozzi are perhaps the most famous examples of such a form, but they are by no means the only ones. Goldoni's original version of *The Servant of Two Masters* belonged to the same category, though this detail is frequently passed over. In reading the works in this category, one can have a significant aesthetic experience in the form of a more or less complex visualization of the intended action. On stage, the performance text is partly improvised and partly acted from the text. In addition to the constraints of the first line of the performance text, the pre-existing material includes much of the dialogue, and some basic stage directions envisioned on the second line. In the third line, the performers enact the dialogue given to them and integrate it with dialogue and dramatic business of their own making by direct improvisation. The textual ontology of such plays is fluid and complex. It is dual when the actors perform scenes *ex scripto*, and, in the analysis of such scenes, the type-token binomial may have some degree of utility. But when the actors improvise, it is as singular as in plays of the first category. In all plays of this type – such as Gozzi's *Turandot* (in Gozzi 1962), in which all of Truffaldino's speeches are left for the improviser to compose, intertwining them in dialogue with the scripted speeches of other characters – the ontology oscillates between duality and singularity. Since the ratio of scripted to unscripted textuality can vary considerably from one play to the next, and even from one scene to the next in the same play, this category can include a large variety of hybrid situations.

The third category includes plays that already exist in a fully scripted form, complete with dialogue and stage directions, either incorporated into the dialogue by the author or given separately. Such plays can achieve aesthetic fullness as literary works or as theatrical performances, though the aesthetic experience would be of different kinds. A performed version of such plays is endowed with a dual textual ontology since they exist as both literary and performance textuality. As the

script is embodied on stage, however, an element of improvisation cannot be avoided and may frequently be a mark of aesthetic distinction. Improvisation may be the source of phonic and physical gestures, and even expressive proxemic relations, not contemplated in the stage directions but supplied by the performers in their particular interpretation of the play. To the extent that we may be willing to consider such improvisation as an accretive function of production, designed to enlarge the aesthetic body of the literary text by translating it into the multi-medial language of the stage, the type-token paradigm may be usefully applied to the play. This can be done, however, only in a simple consideration of the play as a whole, viewed in a long-range perspective, because only at that level can the improvisatory inventiveness of the performers disappear in the vocabulary of the production. The play has a dual ontology since it exists both as a literary text and as a performance text. In the third category, the performance text includes relatively little improvisation. The first and second lines are entirely given in the script. In the third line, the performers enact the script, filtering it through their bodies and voices, making it their own without changing the original. This is the situation of all scripted drama and has less relevance to the idea of stage improvisation.

3 Memory and Imagination

In early sources on acting, the term "memory" is used in two different senses. In the first, it refers to the cumulative retention of ideas, language, and actions, acquired in training and experience, and retrieved as needed. In the second sense, it refers to the precise memorization of lines in a script. The importance of cumulative memory to successful improvisation would be impossible to overestimate. Niccolò Barbieri, an accomplished actor and playwright of the early Commedia tradition, said in *La supplica* (*The Supplication*, 1584), that actors train to strengthen their memory, accumulating such things as "sayings, phrases, love-speeches, reprimands, cries of despair and ravings in order to have them ready for the proper occasion" (53). The collection of such items constitutes the special vocabulary of their art, which may be retrieved and used in the appropriate scene. Pier Maria Cecchini was speaking from experience when he wrote in his *Frutti delle moderne comedie et avisi a chi le recita* (*Fruits of Modern Comedies and Advice for Those Who Recite Them*, 1628) that the actor must learn to be in control of his memory because memory is what gives him the material that he needs for all the occasions that arise in a play (50). Part of his control is organizing the vocabulary, not only by occasion but also by character type, for easy mastery and appropriate retrieval at the right opportunity. Actors who want to play the role of the young lover, for example, must have acquired a vocabulary appropriate to the character and pertinent to the situations in which the character is likely to find himself. In training for the role, they should read as much as possible, building up their repertory of useful expressions, including short speeches relevant to the behavior of the character in typical contexts. In all cases, the special vocabulary so acquired is additional to the actors' general knowledge of language, including common figures of speech also stored in his memory.

The cultivation of memory in the second sense, involving the memorization of a script for precise and quick recollection on stage, the *sine qua non* of the art of text-based performances, is not crucial to the practice of improvisational acting, but it is significant. In many improvisational plays, some characters, particularly the young lover, make occasional use of set speeches, and the practice of closing a scene with a rhyming couplet, known as *chiusette*, certainly involved text memorization and attention to rhythmic details. In his treatise on acting, Perrucci went as far as to claim that, in the recitation of *chiusette* and memorized bits of dialogue in verse, lengthening short vowels or shortening long ones was considered a performance flaw of serious magnitude, serious enough for the actor to deserve derision by knowledgeable members of the audience (Perrucci 2008: 130). On a larger scale, the Commedia dell'Arte tradition, as we shall see, includes a subgenre of hybrid performance text, in which the scripted part, to be memorized exactly as written,

accounted for most of the performance text. For now, it is sufficient to say that in strictly improvised theatre, such as the type that flourished in the golden age of Commedia dell'Arte in the 16th and 17th centuries, text memorization was significant even when it accounted for a small part of the final text seen by the audience.

In the study of improvised drama, it is important to consider the question of how the faculty of memory is related to the creative activity of the imagination. An exceptionally clear statement of the question was proposed in 1700 by Évariste Gherardi, a distinguished Italian-born Harlequin of the Comédie-Italienne in Paris, based at the theatre of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, until the productions were suspended and the company was banished by royal decree in 1697. In the introduction to his collection of plays performed by the Italian company at the Hotel de Bourgogne, Gherardi defends the art of impromptu playing in clear and precise language against criticism from a text-centered perspective. This statement is representative of his views and, despite its brevity, covers the fundamentals of improvisatory acting in the golden age of the Commedia dell'Arte. He begins by reversing the criticism, saying that script-based acting is an inferior art:

> Qui dit bon comedien italien, dit un homme qui a du fond, qui joue plus d'imagination que de memoire; qui compose en jouant, tout ce qu'il dit; qui fait seconder celui avec qui il se trouve sur le theâtre; c'est-a-dire, qu'il marie si bien ses paroles & ses actions avec celles de son camarade, qu'il entre sur le champ dans tout le jeu & dans tous les mouvements que l'autre lui demande, d'une maniere à faire croire à tout le monde qu'ils étoient deja concertés.
>
> *(Gherardi 1741: [5r-v]; first ed. 1700)*[4]

Simplifying the situation as much as possible, Gherardi claims, without hesitation, that improvisatory playing requires greater skill and creativity than script-based acting, which, in his view, entails nothing more than learning lines by heart. To be an improvisatory player, one must first acquire the right background, which Gherardi calls the actor's foundation to emphasize that it represents an underlying body of knowledge without which the art of improvisation would be reduced to nothing.

The foundation, we expect, includes all the technical aspects of acting basic to improvisatory and script-based performers alike that are generally stressed in all training programs, however diverse they may be. But in the case of improvisatory theatre, the foundation refers to the body of knowledge that will enable them to speak their part on the spot, responding, with the requisite resourcefulness, to unforeseen developments at every moment of the scene. Such knowledge must include familiarity with a large variety of dramatic situations that might arise from a particular incident. It is from that familiarity that the actors acquire the verbal and physical vocabulary they need to respond to an unforeseen development and contribute to its further elaboration in accordance with the purpose of the scene. Improvisational actors always act in the face of uncertainty. They never know for certain how another actor on stage will react to an utterance or a gesture. A good foundation is a familiarity with enough dramatic situations to be able to face uncertainty with confidence. Such familiarity may be gained from reading and careful observation of both the theatre and society, and it includes knowledge of social behavior and mastery of language, not in the abstract sense of grammar and dictionaries, but as living speech, unseparated from the vocal and physical gestures with which it normally occurs, both on the stage and in society.

Equipped with this background, the actor can perform, with whatever stylization is appropriate to the genre and the character, the required response. In doing so, however, he does not quickly scan the verbal and physical vocabulary available and choose the right response. Like an orator, for whom, as Merleau-Ponty put it, "his speech is his thought" (Merleau-Ponty 2004: 209), he chooses as he speaks. He thinks in character, and he thinks his response as he delivers it. He does so, however, within a number of constraints. In addition to the dramatic constraints of

the scene itself – which prevent him from developing the scene in a direction that would undermine the prescribed structure of the dramatic action – he must remain aware of the vocabulary, both physical and verbal, available to the performer with whom he must interact on stage since he cannot do something to which his partner cannot respond.

Acting within these parameters, he can project an air of spontaneity precisely because he thinks as he acts on the spot. He does so by means of both memory and imagination, as all performers do, but the ratio of imagination to memory is much higher in improvisatory performance than in script-based acting, which relies on the prior memorization of speeches. An impromptu performer creates the perceptible material of the performance text directly on stage, generating it at great speed from material stored in his memory and refashioned for the occasion, adhering, at all times, to the thematic guidelines of the scenario to prevent confusion. The logic of unscripted performance is grounded in the actor's repository of verbal and physical gestures at his command but also on his imagination since that is the source of his creativity in selecting, modifying, and developing expressive material stored in his memory. It is, moreover, the source of his alertness to unexpected turns in the action. Structural contingency plays a dominant role in the logic of the impromptu performance since the sense of expectedness that accompanies every moment of the action is always at risk of a sudden, unpredictable turn. Personal fallibility, of course, also plays a significant part, since the actor, for whatever reason, may prove unequal to the aesthetic requirements of a particular scene. Alertness and resourcefulness are necessary to face contingency in an aesthetically satisfactory manner, to correct personal fallibility, and to cover up noticeable hesitation in acting partners so as to keep the action within the assigned constraints of the scene.

In an impromptu performance, on-the-spot thinking means on-the-spot composition of original text. In order to understand what sort of creativity is entailed in the process we should recall that in Gherardi's day not only were memory and imagination more closely linked than they are today, but the imagination itself was not yet understood as the creative faculty of the Romantics and their descendants. In the 17th century, it was still commonly considered a faculty that could operate only with material previously apprehended from reality, directly observed or mediated by language. Its creative activity was largely understood as a form retrieval and purposive refashioning by imitation. To act chiefly from the imagination, composing the text in the process, meant largely reusing previously encountered material, modifying it to suit the new context. This understanding of creativity in impromptu composition had deep roots in the rhetorical tradition, in which the virtuosic handling of language had been a core subject of impromptu speaking. In the late Middle Ages, improvisation was understood as "fluency of rehandling" previously assimilated materials, as Charles Sears Baldwin wrote long ago (Baldwin 1928: 15), and involved a close association of the imagination and memory. "Re-handling" does not imply prescriptive normativity: the original is regarded as a source of expressive material and not also as a model of structure and form. In improvised drama, this notion of fluency was extended to cover physical as well as verbal language. Without a well-endowed memory, full of dramatic possibilities of incident development and appropriate language for their expression, text-composition by imaginative improvisation would have been inconceivable. Gherardi does not deny that; he merely says that for the performance of unscripted drama, the ratio imagination-to-memory is heavily weighted in favor of the imagination, namely, of a creativity viewed chiefly as fluency in adapting to new situations material stored in the memory.

In a dialogical situation, by far the most common in drama, improvisation takes place in the presence of and in collaboration with one or two other actors on stage. Gherardi notes that each actor marries his verbal and physical expressions with those of his fellow actors on stage in such a way that they are all within the dramatic action ordained in the scenario and are all perceived as if resulting from an elaborate and detailed production script, such as we can envision on the third line of the model of performance textuality proposed above. The actors sharing the stage respond

to and stimulate each other while advancing the action of the scene towards the end predetermined by the scenario. In successful improvisation, each actor's words and gestures combine with those of the others to form a succession of composite units of meaning in a chain that extends from the beginning to the end of the scene.

Throughout the process, the context for both the actors and the audience is the uncertainty of what is about to take place, a wavering of consciousness between different possibilities available in the text. For the actors, this uncertainty represents the risk of lapsing into failure, but it also represents the possibility of an innovative performance and original creation within the very form that they have so far enacted. If the actors do not possess the requisite skill, the uncertainty may lead to a clumsy fumble, such as that which can take place when actors attempt to perform physical gestures beyond their capacity to sustain them, or when they begin to sing beautifully only to fall unintentionally into vocal noise. But if the actors are endowed with the necessary artistic skills, the fumble can be avoided, and the uncertainty will be, for the audience, an opportunity to engage aesthetically with the text, momentarily projecting different outcomes of the situation onto the screen of consciousness.

4 Formalization of the Dynamics

Gherardi's observation suggests the possibility of formalizing impromptu composition by reducing it to variables that can be presupposed in all practical situations of onstage composition by the performer. We can begin the exercise with the simplest situation possible, namely, a dialogue between two characters, A and B, each equipped with a repertory of possible responses to the occurrence of a given incident. We can conveniently label the responses a_i and b_i, where *i* can vary from 1 to the total number of expressions at the disposal of each performer in his memory and appropriate to the character. An a_i or a b_i may be a phrase, a facial expression, a quick turn of the mask, a posture, the use of a stage property, crossing the stage, and the like, or any combination of such signs in the paradigm of materials stored in each actor's memory. A colligation of signs into composite units of stimulus and response, which we may regard as the smallest meaningful segments of a two-character performance text, could be represented as a_i–b_i, a dialogical structure in which A and B take turns at stimulating, and responding to, each other. An example of a chain of such composite segments could be a_3–b_5–a_5–b_2–a_2–b_5 and so on, which should be read as indicating that A proceeds from a given incident by performing action a_3, selecting it from his paradigm of availabilities and adapting it to express the character's response to a specific contingency, while B responds to that stimulus with b_5 from his own paradigm, giving rise to the minimal segment a_3–b_5. At that point, b_5 becomes a stimulus for A, giving rise to the segment b_5–a_2. A's contribution, in other words, must be so adapted to the situation at hand as to stimulate B into providing an appropriate response from his own repertoire, a response that advances the development of the scene by becoming an appropriate stimulus for A, and so on until the end of the scene. The utility of this abstraction is that it enables us to identify the underlying form of dialogical improvisation, which, in turn, can help us analyze the creative process with some rigor, without unduly generalizing what we might observe in a specific situation.

In the ideal situation, the actor has at his fingertips a useful vocabulary of theatrical signs, but he is also familiar with his partner's potential ability to respond appropriately to the sign that he produces, so that, as Gherardi observed, he might marry his language and gestures with those of his partner. The reciprocal dependence of the actors is a necessary condition of performance because the composition of every segment of text is the result of a collaborative creative effort. Such dependence is easier to form in small companies with high membership loyalty, companies in which the actors that play opposite each other are familiar with each other's repertoire, skill, and alertness. This was, in fact, the condition of typical companies in Italy, where the improvisational

theatre was more highly developed than elsewhere in Europe. In our formal model of stage improvisation, reciprocal dependence represents a set of pragmatic constraints operating in addition to and in concomitance with the dramatic ones of the scenario. On stage reciprocal dependence is a heightened version of the tuning-in relationship basic to all communication, in which, as Alfred Schutz (1970: 216) put it, "the reciprocal sharing of the other's flux of experiences in inner time, by living through a vivid present together," makes it possible for the interlocutors to engage meaningfully with each other, each contributing a unit to the construction of composite segments.

Each element of a minimal segment looks backward to the previous segment as the source of its immediate semantic motivation and forward to the desired outcome of the scene. It has the aspectual structure of a synchronic display of retention and protention. Since there is no script, the occurrence of a particular sign at any point of the performance text cannot be predetermined, but we can surmise that, from the perspective of the listening interlocutor, or even of the audience, it is governed by a degree of probability intuitively assessed from the relative frequency with which the sign has been observed in other dramatic situations of the same type and stored in the memory. Since the retentive aspect refers to the immediate past of the segment in question, we can say that the probability of occurrence of a new sign is influenced by the occurrence of the one that immediately precedes it. At the junction points, when the second element of a composite segment becomes the first element of the next, the actor forms his response chiefly under the influence of the previous one in the sequence.

In probability theory, a creative operation that adheres to this condition is known as a Markovian process and belongs to a class of stochastic activities the behavior of which is well known. Such processes may be fruitfully used as a source of insights in the development of a detailed formal model of stage improvisation as a text composition process on a purely objective basis (Pietropaolo 2016: 69–73). The most basic observation that we can make in this regard is that the Markovian character of textual flow reduces the risk of discontinuity and protects actors from falling prey to the temptation of free improvisation, which would take them outside the aesthetic boundaries of the form that they have been creating. The Markovian condition represents a restraining limit on the actors: it motivates them to discern, in the protensive aspect of the segment that has just been produced, the retentive aspect of the one about to be brought into existence, ensuring by this process that the sequence of semiotic acts follows a logic of succession designed to avert disjointedness. This is tantamount to saying that they operate within that logic and advance it at the same time, simultaneously articulating and revealing its operation at the transition point.

Within a scene, the last expression performed lends itself to a combination with different other expressions in the actors' performance vocabulary because it can logically imply different lines of development, all of which are Markovian functions of the preceding one, each characterized by a unique probability of occurrence as a more or less likely turn of events. The actors choose to pursue the most appropriate narrative implications intuitively, while the audience is engaged in surmising to which direction the dramatic action will turn. If we assume a long-range view of the textual context, varying the size of our purview from the first two-segment section, in which there is only one transition point, to an entire scene, in which there are many, and finally to an increasingly larger section of the play until we reach the end, the character of segment construction at transition points is still Markovian, but the retentive aspect of the new segment created must extend further back to include all the narrative performed from the opening utterance of the context up to that point of the action (Pietropaolo 2016: 72). It is clear that the number of protensive developments available at transition points decreases as the retentive purview is increased simply because as the play unfolds, the action approaches its closure or the point where the logic of the narrative will not allow further improvisation. Understood in this sense, as the full experience of the textual past operating as a principle of suggestiveness, continuity, and intelligibility on the textual present, the retentive aspect of the improvised performance coincides with its aesthetic form.

5 Aesthetic Considerations

Gherardi's statement that the actor composes the text as he acts it, and that he stimulates his interlocutor to collaborate with him in composing it, might ring remarkably modern for readers attuned to Pareyson's aesthetic of formativity. Aesthetics is not the study of art in abstraction but a study of the experience of the artists as they make art, responding imaginatively to external reality. His fundamental idea, that in all art "l'opera agisce come formante ed esiste come formata" (*the work acts as forming and exists as formed*; Pareyson 2010: 249) – involving, as it does, a mode of making that generates its own principle of self-propulsion as it creates its products – sheds the light of philosophy on Gherardi's concept of improvisation in early Commedia dell'Arte acting. It would not be a difficult exercise to show that the notion of form as both a shaped product and a self-shaping process, respectively *forma formata* and *formans*, is the fundamental presupposition of stage improvisation. These two aspects of form in the art of stage improvisation are aesthetic correlatives of the psychological continuum that we explained, invoking the phenomenology of retention and protention, on the one hand, and the processual mechanism of Markovian continuity, on the other. The fact that, when dramatic improvisation was flourishing, aesthetics as a separate discipline had not yet come into being is, of course, totally irrelevant, as is the fact that there was not yet a specific vocabulary for describing the artistic value of improvisation. Perrucci and Gherardi made brave attempts at a conceptual apparatus, but neither was philosophically minded enough to produce a theory more sophisticated than a practitioner's apologia for their art in the face of criticism from script-focused perspectives. Yet it is clear from their arguments that improvised drama is for them the exemplary performing art when considered from a vantage point that we should not hesitate to call "aesthetic."

Improvisation begins with ideas in the scenario, but it gives these ideas a verbal and gestural body that they did not have in the scenario and, what is more, determines the aesthetic form that they will have for the perceiving audience in attendance. Gherardi, for one, had no doubts that the beauty of improvised plays was due entirely to the creative agency of the actors. The real source of beauty was not some pre-existing essence but the performance itself:

> Ainsi la plus grande beauté de leurs pieces est inseparable de l'action, le succés des leurs comedies dépendant absolument des acteurs qui leur donnent plus ou moins d'agrémens, selon qu'ils ont plus ou moins d'esprit, & selon la situation bonne ou mauvaise où ils se trouvent en jouant.
>
> *(5r)*[5]

In this remarkable passage, Gherardi says not only that the beauty of the play as a work of art is inseparable from the performative expressions of the actors, but also that the actors endow it with aesthetic qualities (*agrémens*) according to the liveliness of their minds (*esprit*) and by letting the changing configuration of the creative process itself (*jouant*) determine their appropriateness. The situation in which the actors find themselves, which is the situation that they have created through their improvisation, determines the logic of their other actions and, hence, the aesthetic form of their performance. While in progress, a stage improvisation can be perceived as something in-the-making, and yet also as something made, which reveals its making. What Fritz Noske once said of music in a lecture on the self-forming aspect of its form – that music is an art of the present participle – may be said *a fortiori* and much less abstractly of dramatic stage improvisation (Noske 1976: 45). It is dramatic art in-the-making, the coming into material being of an unscripted verbal and gestural narrative, generated by actors who are first and foremost agents of its formativity.

As the play progresses, the audience can see in the unfolding of every scene compositional acts of performance not inferior to those of scripted drama. Carlo Gozzi, who was a champion of the

Commedia dell'Arte but who was also fully conscious of his own merits as a stylist, in his analysis of Sacchi's production of *L'Amore delle tre melarance* (*Love of Three Oranges*) at the Teatro San Samuele in Venice in 1761, went as far as to say that the gestured utterances of the improvisatory players were frequently of such quality that they could neither be expressed nor surpassed by the literary word: "né sono esprimibili dall'inchiostro, né superabili da' poeti" (Gozzi 1962: 77). He emphasizes this point in a highly sophisticated manner by recalling a scene with one of his lowliest characters: Smeraldina, a Moorish maidservant of Turkish origin, capable of speaking only broken Italian in the manner of a recent immigrant (*turco italianizzato*). At a certain point, Smeraldina suddenly began waxing lyrical in Tuscan – that is, in the literary language of all Italian states, including the Republic of Venice – with the grace of a refined poet. She did so under the dramaturgical pretense that Fata Morgana had bewitched her by introducing a Tuscan devil into her tongue, a supernatural spirit that could control her speech from the inside and enable her to speak with insouciance in a new literary style. In this brief scene of against-type dramaturgy, Adriana Sacchi Zannoni, who played Smeraldina opposite her brother Antonio, vindicates her right to a status as an artist on a par with poets, as a player improvising beautiful text, not in the uncouth manner of one outside the world of art, but with the elegance of a great artist, moved by an inner spirit of creativity. She challenged all poets to display a better sense of literary correctness – "sfidava tutti i poeti nel ragionare correttamente" (Gozzi 1962: 78) that is, with a better understanding of the aesthetic principles of literary composition than she could demonstrate by extemporizing speech directly in performance.

This metatheatrical moment, stunning in its simplicity, is laden with hermeneutical implications, foremost among which is the image of the Tuscan devil brought into the picture in order to justify the sudden change in language and stylistic register, like the intrusion of a new code into her old one. The devil hiding in Smeraldina's tongue is a metaphor designed to justify the fact that Adriana Sacchi Zannoni was breaking the stage rule that kept the linguistic and stylistic register of the maidservant at a very low level and was making a powerful gesture of self-governance subjecting her acting to a rule of higher order according to which even a plebeian immigrant woman can be portrayed as waxing lyrical in Tuscan. Reversing the action of Titivillus – the devil of popular culture who collected the words and syllables that, in clumsy and undignified performances, priests and cantors dropped from the script they were supposed to sing (Montañés 2018: 7) – the devil in Smeraldina's tongue gives her the words that, as a true artist, she is entitled to pronounce, celebrating her own and her character's claim to recognition from the representatives of high culture and the arbiters of good taste. The scene illustrates the logic of form-creation generated by the actress at the same time as she generates the form itself. It is an example of how the improviser creates a dramatic text as an artistic form that legitimates itself from within because it has what Pareyson would call its own "legalità interna" (Pareyson 2010: 7), that is its own inner normativity. This internal source of legitimation prompts the actress to cross the cultural boundaries of her character in an impromptu performance against type. Equally significant is the fact that the logic of form-making is itself an aesthetic embellishment of note, rich with allusions, both philosophical and literary. Smeraldina's devil suggests to the actress what words she can say in defense of her artistic dignity and provides her, moreover, with the literary style that she can adopt to do so, essentially giving her lines in the usual manner of a stage prompter. But the fact that the devil is Tuscan is no doubt a comic allusion to Dante, the great Tuscan poet who knew all about the supernatural world, who was famously conversant with the suggestive power of devils, and who, in defining the Sweet New Style that gave rise to Tuscan literature said he only brought out into language the sentiment dictated to him by love from a mysterious place within him (*Purg.* XXIV: 53–4). With this dazzling flash of brilliance, Smeraldina illuminates the player's claim to aesthetic recognition for both the method and the result of her improvisation.

The aesthetic value of a perfectly improvised performance text in which the principles of the art are fused with the uniqueness of the performer's imagination, and in which the shallow psychology of the characters is ontologically informed by the much more complex one of the performer – all of this was vividly present in the consciousness of practitioners and observers of stage improvisation by Commedia dell'Arte players. The aesthetics of formativity enables us to recognize the extent and depth of the players' self-understanding as artists and to appreciate the sophistication of their art. Stage improvisation is an activity in which the individual responds to the world around him by choosing one of the possibilities of behavior made available to him by his imagination, something that we have seen to be a fundamental aspect of the art through our Markovian modeling of a dramatic transition from one situation to the other. As an object of perception, dramatic improvisation is dynamic in its configuration, always self-forming and self-formed, ephemeral in its duration, singular in its ontology, and never alienable from the artistic identity of the improviser.

Notes

1 Antonio Sacchi was usually called Truffaldino Sacchi (or Sacco), the name of the character to whom he had dedicated his professional life. He was the head of a company based in Venice that consisted, for the most part, of members of his family: his wife Antonia Franchi (in the role of the prima donna Beatrice), their two daughters Angela and Giovanna (occasional prima donnas), Angela's husband Giovanni Vitalba (in the role of the Innamorato), Antonio's older sister Adriana Sacchi Zannoni (as Smeraldina), her husband Atanasio Zannoni (in the role of Brighella), and their children Idelfonso (creator of the character Agonia) and Teresa (who eventually inherited her mother's role as Smeraldina). Other famous members included Cesare D'Arbes (a very talented Pantalone) and Agostino Fiorilli, a later addition who brought the southern Tartaglia into the company's repertoire of stock characters, replacing the more canonical Dottore when Roderigo Lombardi died in 1749. Cf. Ferrone 2014: 224 f., and Pietropaolo 2016: 66 f. and 126–7.

2 Goldoni 1967: 12: "non ho dubbio a credere, che meglio essi non l'abbiano all'improvviso adornata, di quello possa aver io fatto scrivendola."

3 Goldoni 1967: 13:

> Mi sono per questa ragione indotto a scriverla tutta, non già per obbligare quelli che sosterranno il carattere del Truffaldino, a dir per l'appunto le parole mie, quando di meglio ne sappiano dire, ma per dichiarare la mia intenzione, e per una strada assai dritta condurli al fine.

4 English translation in Cole and Chinoy (1970: 58):

> Anyone can learn a part by heart and recite on the stage all that he has learned; but to become an Italian comedian something quite different is necessary. For to speak of a 'good Italian comedian' mens a man with a foundation, who acts more from imagination than from memory; who, in acting, composes everything that he speaks; who stimulates the players that he finds opposite him on the stage; that is to say, who so successfully marries words and action with those of his comrades that he enters immediately into the play and into all the movements that the other demands of him, in a manner to make everyone believe that it has all been prearranged.

5 English translation in Cole and Chinoy (1970: 58):

> Thus the greatest beauty of their comedies is inseparable from their action. The success of these comedies depends absolutely upon the actors who give them more or less point, according as they have more or less spirit, and in accordance with the favorable or unfavorable situation in which they find themselves while acting.

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PERFORMANCE ART AND IMPROVISATION

Dieter Mersch

1 The Artist is Present

When the Museum of Modern Art organized a retrospective of Marina Abramović's work (including her collaborations with Ulay), the artist sat in a chair in the museum's atrium for eight hours every day from March 14 to May 31 and did nothing except receive the visitors who sat across from her. The performance was titled: *The Artist is Present*.[1] "The rules were simple: Each person could sit across from me for as short or as long a time as he or she wished. We would maintain eye contact. The public was not to touch or speak to me" (Abramović 2016: 309). The performance was an immense success. Over the run of seventy-five days, more than 750,000 people passed through the exhibition in long lines (see Abramović 2016: 313). More than 1,500 of them – among them Sharon Stone, Tilda Swinton, Björk, Lou Reed, Isabella Rossellini, Bob Wilson, and Abramović's former partner Ulay himself – seized the chance to sit on the chair before Abramović and make eye contact with her. Some stayed there for just a few minutes, others for more than an hour. "One man sat twenty-one times, the first time for seven hours" (Abramović 2016: 314). Like a living sculpture wearing a red dress, "floor-length and woven in cashmere and wool" (Abramović 2016: 312), Abramović greeted every visitor the same way: by slowly lifting her head and silently exchanging eye contact with them. The reactions ranged from sentimentality to conversion: some people cried; others said feeling Abramović's gaze was an impactful event; many had the impression they were living through a special, unique moment; not a few returned to experience the same thing again and again: "It was [a] complete surprise," Abramović stated in an interview, "this enormous need of humans to actually have contact" (Marina Abramović Institute 2020).

Some people criticized the performance's pathos. But as the artist acknowledged in retrospect, it was one of the most difficult works that she had ever undertaken, because it demanded from her an enormous degree of discipline. She had to sit there for seven hours, receive and adjust to every single new visitor, and suppress hunger, thirst, and pain. "This is a rule of performance: once you enter into this mental-physical construct you've devised, the rules are set […]. Once you enter the space of performance, you must accept whatever happens" (Abramović 2016: 313, 321). Both statements demarcate the space traversed by artistic performances, which straddle two extremes. Temporal, immaterial, and singular, they are, on the one hand, regulated by self-imposed rules, and on the other, are open to the unpredictable (*improvisus*). In artistic performances, nothing is decided in advance except the framework in which they take place. The ethos is clear: not to exclude anything that might happen within the defined limits. This found its perhaps most radical

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expression in Abramović's early performance *Rhythm 0* (1974): lasting six hours, she was even threatened with death. In contrast, the simplicity of the setting and extreme length of *The Artist is Present* enabled both constitutive aspects of performance to come forth simultaneously: *discipline* and *event*.

As Peggy Phelan wrote of Abramović's 2002 *The House with the Ocean View*, the unity of discipline and event has the effect that performance can never be fully described or explained, but only witnessed (see Phelan 2004). Performance cannot be consumed, but demands participation in various forms. Every act of participation occurs "undivided," which is to say that it absorbs visitors in such a way that they cannot withdraw themselves. In the words of cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, one might speak of a "liminal experience" here, a point picked up on and applied to performance by Erika Fischer-Lichte (Turner 1969; Fischer-Lichte 2008). This liminal experience involves both artists and the audience, who are transformed by the performance into collaborators, witnesses, or just bystanders. This anticipates the second fundamental attribute of performance: discipline and event serve to bring forth *irreversibility* and the *impossibility of non-participation*. Performance derives its specific ethical rigor from these two elements. It aims less at invoking affects, a sense of presence, and memorable details that might give it a unique "aura" (see Mersch 2002b: 223 ff.). Instead, performance primarily seeks to induce the undeniable presence of alterity as the presence of the ethical. This is why *The Artist is Present* is so compelling. Indeed, according to Emmanuel Lévinas, the awareness of the "face" is one of the most urgent ethical experiences that we can have (see Lévinas 1986). At the same time, "being together" and the exchange of eye contact constitute the foundations of an emerging social situation, in which Jean-Luc Nancy locates "the common" and the origins of "being-in-common" (Nancy 2000).

Again and again, Abramović has transgressed the bounds of what is acceptable and what is humanly bearable with exceptional determination and disregard for herself. Not seldom, she took herself to the limits of her own existence. "I'm interested in how far you can push the energy of the human body, how far you can go, and then see that, actually, our energy is almost limitless," she stated in an interview, "It's not about the body, it's about the mind, (which) pushes you to the extremes that you never could imagine" (Marina Abramović Institute 2020). Among the most striking works of this sort are the series of solo performances *Rhythm 0–10* from the 1970s and her collaborations with Ulay like *Relation in Time* (1977), *Imponderabilia* (1977), or *Rest Energy* (1980). Another is the performative installation Balkan Baroque from 1997. Staged as a kind of metaphorical act of repentance for the Yugoslav Wars, Abramović carefully washed the bones of dead cows. Yet another is *Seven Easy Pieces* from 2005. Put on at the Guggenheim in New York, this re-performance of works by Valie Export and Bruce Naumann sparked a discussion on copyright, the possibility of re-staging performances, and the impossibility of reducing the cultural value of evanescent performance art to its commercial potential.

2 From the History of Performance Art

Alongside self-regulation, relinquishing control is the preeminent characteristic of performance. Performance should be distinguished from improvisation, even if there is no performance without improvisational moments and even though every performance has to be provisionally adapted to the specific spatiotemporal conditions of its setting. The unpredictable, or *improvisus*, takes on a new meaning in performance. It does not signify the suddenness of a flash of ingenuity, but the contingency of unanticipated or unplanned elements. Indeed, there is no improvisation – not in jazz, communication, everyday experimental constellations, or technological applications – without a performative aspect. It is not that the performative is improvisatory. Rather, the improvisatory is performative. Moreover, improvisation and performance confront us with two distinct modes of creativity. The first, improvisation, is rooted in the production, playing out, and variation of

rules, while the other, performance, is rooted in the creative treatment of practices and their various forms of realization. Improvisation takes foundational norms and conventions to the limits of their utopian possibilities, transforming them into their other – listen to the almost natural flow in Keith Jarrett's *The Köln Concert* or to the audacious acrobatic of guitar art in early rock music – while performance ruptures and inverts the normative into its negation of itself – look at Valie Export's interventional actions during the late Sixties. Both elicit unpredictable occurrences, but in different ways. While improvisation is often geared towards surprise, performance aims to evoke random effects, contingencies, or critical instants. Performance is provocative because it brings about partially indeterminate, opaque situations in which actions lead to consequences we don't understand. And while rules enable improvisations to continue, in performances, they create an ambiguous space of alternatives that artists seek to unleash. Spontaneity and inspiration define improvisation, while evanescence, *Tyche*, and *Kairos* define performance (Mersch 2000: 134–7) Improvisation contains an element of *automaton*, puts virtuosity on display, and involves dialogue with the other, because it is always acted out for an audience. In contrast, performance seeks the radical exposition of alterity, that which cannot be anticipated, has no definable form, and might, perhaps, remain uncanny (Mersch 2019: 189–208). This is why performance has both epistemological and ethical dimensions. It critiques knowledge while, at the same time, making decisions about the undecidable, since its sometimes undesired or even irresponsible results fulfill the purpose of indirect reflections on norms, social practices, and other conventions. This stands in juxtaposition to improvisation, which is simply a matter of play.

The history of performance itself reveals it to be a matter of breaking rules, engaging in unconventional practices, and transgression. It was not just a part of the avantgarde of the 1950s and 1960s. By interweaving the aesthetic, ethical, and political, it remains one of the most essential artistic forms of expression to this very day. It was initiated both by the revolutions and social critique of the mid-20th century and by artists' critiques of the burgeoning art market. While the abstract avantgarde was being accused of a lack of responsibility and efficacy, performance artists sought to counter with direct action, which could not be consumed, could not be immobilized in a collection, and could not be bought as an investment – in short, they sought an art form that evaded the circulation of commodities. This sealed the deal on the "performative turn" in art (see Fischer-Lichte 2005). It represented a transition from the "work" – and, as a consequence, from the conception of the artist as a "master" – towards practice and process, be it in the form of a singular act, a large-scale happening, a violent intervention like in Viennese Actionism (see Weibel 1997), or, as in feminist performance, by rattling the institutions of the "masculinity of creativity" (Mersch 2002b: 217–40). The historical caesura could not be any sharper. Art was no longer being understood on the basis of its "eternal value" (Benjamin 2008: 20) as an enduring object inviting contemplation. Rather, performance left over nothing but its ephemerality, casting aside permanence in all forms except memories, secondary traces, and artifacts. No image, no object, no medium can contain it. Artistic performance embraces the impossibility of documenting it. While art in the traditional sense was the product of *work* that gave various materials a form and symbolic meaning, performance is an act that parasitically feeds on a situation in order to transform it into something shaking and shocking or to disrupt social reality. In his short text on the "unconditional university," Jacques Derrida noted this difference between work and performance. Work adheres to an economy of production, while performance, despite the stage-setting and rules-creation that precede it, takes part in the non-intentional, unrepeatable dimension of the event (Derrida 2005).[2] Something similar can be said of the difference between improvisation and performance. While the former draws its power from creative productivity, the latter institutes a break, asserts difference. The key distinction thus consists in the fact that works only acquire their legitimacy through signs, through being identifiable and repeatable – performances dispense with signs. They exhaust their entire potential in a process without identity, leaving behind, at

the most, nothing but traces. This is why Daniel Charles, writing about John Cage's aleatory art, described its "non-being" and the "revocability [of its] existence" (Charles 1984: 97).

This situates performance in a novel position in aesthetics that also grants art new social relevance. The core elements are action, its physicality, the suspension of the real conditions that constitute a situation, the act's temporal evanescence, and the expectation that all those involved participate. In the early 1950s, the phenomenon attracted considerable attention when the Japanese group Gutai, inspired by Zen Buddhist exercises, leapt through a row of paper screens. The act did more than emblematically tear through classic visual art. It also made visible the uniqueness of every jump itself (see Osaki 1998). Analogously, in his *Anthropométrie de l'Époque Bleue* (1960–61), Yves Klein painted the bodies of nude models blue and then had them press their bodies onto the canvas like a stamp, leaving behind "traces of their life." Paintbrushes, other traditional painting instruments, and the mimetic impulse are absent from the scene, and the artist does not paint at all. Instead, he proceeds like a director or conductor for those present. This performance, too, allows us to witness the above-discussed dialectic between self-control and unpredictability. By the early 1960s, this dialectic took on a political charge: in France with Guy Debord and the Situationists; in Austria with Viennese Actionism; and in Germany and the USA with the aesthetics of happenings and the Fluxus Movement, pushed forward by people like Allan Kaprow, George Maciunas, Nam June Paik, and Joseph Beuys, just to name a few. There was hardly a group of artists that did not employ performative aesthetics, whether in theater, visual arts, video, or musical composition.

From its very beginning, performance has been an interdisciplinary venture that fuses events, concepts, media art, and the subversive praxis of aesthetically criticizing institutions of all sorts. Drawing on Beuys' "expanded concept of art," performance radicalized "relations" by transforming perception, social action, pedagogy, and political influence. For instance, in her 1969 *Genital Panic*, Valie Export, outfitted with a machine gun and crotchless pants that revealed her vagina, raided an experimental cinema in Munich that was showing erotic films in order to confront uptight "philistines" with the reality of gender and sex. Around the same time, Peter Weibel performed his *Kriegskunstfeldzug* (War Art Campaign, 1969): during a screening of a documentary film on the Vietnam War, he shot off fireworks in order to shake the audience out of their voyeurism and into the reality of violence. These staged moments of shock aimed to wake people up and overcome the passivity of just watching. But their actual effects could not have been anticipated. The risky nature of the performances was rooted in the exposition and transposition of all participants. They at once removed them from their customary habits (of perception, action, viewing, etc.) and appalled them (see Mersch 2002a). Abramović, Günter Brus, Chris Burden, and – to name a few contemporary examples – Nao Bustamante, Stelarc, and Ricio Bolivier, have taken this to its extreme, placing their own bodies on the line, often to the point of harming themselves or endangering their lives. For instance, in *Rhythm 5* (1974), Abramović passed out from inhaling toxic benzol fumes;[3] in *Zerreißprobe* (1970), Brus poured his own urine into an open wound; in *Shoot* (1971), Burden intentionally shot himself in the arm.[4] Brustamente put her head in a plastic bag full of water in a 2003 performance. Stelarc sewed technological devices into his body that controlled his muscle contractions. In her 2013 performance *Mascarillo rejuvenecadora*, Bolivier, enduring great pain, deformed her own face with clips and needles in order to dramatically put on display how surgery constructs ideals of female beauty (Taylor 2016a: 84 f., 98 f. and 104 f.). Violence is ever-present in all of these demonstrations because it is ever-present in society. These performances were neither politically correct nor did they limit themselves to staging a spectacle. Instead, they metamorphosed their audiences into participants who could not avoid being part of the outrage and, even more, could not avoid validating it (Taylor 2016a: 71, 82 passim).

John Cage's classics, like *4'33"* (1952) and the music circus *Roaratorio* (1979) about James Joyce's *Finnegan's Wake*, seem more playful and less harmful. But the latter performance, in particular, unleashed impenetrable confusion by combining all kinds of sounds until they climaxed in unbearable

noise. *HPSCHD* (1967/69) – a multimedia piece based on pure chance for seven harpsichords, fifty-one tape machines, fifty-eight speakers, and various slides and films – compressed all the sounds into a dense, opaque knot that resisted all attempts to comfortably situate it in one single genre. Cage wanted to practice radically abandoning himself to the event; by suspending all decisions and all attempts to understand, he created an experience in which recipients oscillate between concentration and contingency. Cage's larger performances put into play a kind of chaotic confusion that can be just as difficult to sustain as submission to an inexorably rigid law. "Happy New Ears" was Cage's goodbye to students at the end of every semester. For him, breaking with the norms was not the decisive factor. Rather, it was radicalizing perception, de-subjectifying it, and freeing it from the compulsion to select and exclude.

What paved the way for Cage to take this approach were events, and particularly New York's happenings. Susan Sontag aptly described these events as the "art of radical juxtaposition" (Sontag 2001: 270). A paradigmatic example is the early multimedia happening *Theatre Piece No. 1*, which Cage organized in 1952 together with Robert Rauschenberg, David Tudor, Merce Cunningham, Franz Kline, and M.C. Richards in the cafeteria of Black Mountain College. The performance threw visitors and artists alike into a situation of systematic incomprehensibility.[5] But this transformation of *aisthesis* had as its necessary condition a process of "de-hermeneuticization." Kaprow – who was in Cage's class at the New School of Social Research together with George Brecht and others – then developed the principle of happenings further, creating environments that were simultaneously performed in various places. These performative environments were open for all kinds of unplanned chance occurrences, but without any identifiable dramaturgy. Kaprow thus placed performer and audience on the same level (see Lebel 1965; Dreher 2001: 94). Exemplary for this principle was *18 Happenings in 6 Parts* from 1959. Strict instructions on what to do were handed out to participants in order to create an interactive space between happenings that were occurring in three different rooms (see Schimmel 1998: 61 f.). The actual run of the performance depended both on the highly specific instructions and on how the participants executed them. *Eat* (1964) for instance, perhaps the artist's most well-known happening, was staged in a dark cave where visitors were offered a range of food and drinks while a metronome ticked like a heartbeat in the background (see Kirby 1965: 44–9). But the food was served in different "chambers" of the caves, some of which were only accessible by climbing a ladder, making *Eat* into a multi-sensory happening that, amplified by the darkness, activated the individual senses separately. By organizing it this way, Kaprow disallowed contemplation as a privileged relationship between art and viewer, supplanting it with interaction and the attunement of the senses.

In the early 1960s, before he started focusing on his television works, Nam June Paik also put on spontaneous happenings like this. But he dispensed with instructions and peppered the performances with physical attacks and, in some cases, calculated self-harm. Accordingly, the performances were less about getting the audience to participate or sharpening their senses and more about shaking them up and shocking them. At the *Contre* festival in Cologne in 1960, Paik mixed recordings of screaming women and children in Vietnam with Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* and the sounds of revving motorcycles, fans, and falling pianos. The performance climaxed when Paik smashed a window and left the room, bleeding. After a while, he called the startled audience from a telephone booth and said: "The performance is over" (see Cage 1981: 167 f.; Herzogenrath and Lueg 1986: 143, 136). Beuys, for his part, experimented with methods of temporal extension, sometimes together with Paik, Wolf Vostell, and others. Between 1963 and 1985, he put on thirty-nine actions, among them an agitating event at the assembly hall of Aachen's Technical University in 1964, which upset those present so much that they shouted and physically attacked him. Meanwhile, Viennese Actionists like Otto Mühl and Hermann Nitsch mixed psychoanalytic self-liberation and archaic re-ritualization by smearing the naked bodies of performers with blood, excrement, and internal organs. In particular, Nitsch understood his *Orgien Mysterien Theater* as a

"Gesamtkunstwerk" (it has been staged 125 times since the 1950s) that he thought would effectuate de-sublimation through excess, intoxication, and affective extremes. The aim of this spectacle, which sometimes lasted days, was to fuse audience and actors into a sort of "community."

Such a list can only offer examples, but these examples demonstrate well not just performance art's characteristic mix of calculation and incalculability, but also the wide range of performances that place no limits on what art can be, neither in its subject matter nor in its means and ends. They also underscore that the aesthetics of the performative departs from the traditionally privileged sites of art – the museum, gallery, ateliers – and heads for public squares, courtyards, and roofs in order to be literally between earth and sky. In doing so, it has developed neither a unified style of narration nor a clear mission. It offers no metaphors, instead opting to slash through dominant social norms about what means what by "creating an asymmetrical network of surprises without climax or consummation," as Susan Sontag again pointedly put it (Sontag 2001: 266). Such networks are founded in principles other than the Dionysian improvisation, which is based on expanding the limits of rules, introducing new patterns, and modulating variations. These "networks" are different than improvisation because their explicit embrace of contingency has a "kairological structure" that "shocks the present" (see Charles 1989: 64 ff.) in a way wholly different from the spontaneity of virtuosity. Performance evidences a systematic openness to the provisional nature of occasions, as exemplified by the fact that the unpredictable reactions of participants are often a constitutive part of it. Thus, it seems that words like "caesura," "incision," or "event" are better descriptors of it than "invention" or "spontaneity." While the latter are primarily associated with playfulness, performance is more concerned with the evocation and disclosure of something real. In a word, performance is connected with critique. The palette of possibilities is vast, spanning from Robert Filliou's *No Play in Front of No Audience* (1962)[6] to the notorious repetition of a single action in the performances of Ulay and Abramović to the social critical force of Valie Export and Peter Weibel's tumultuous actions to Nitsch's opulent excesses in the mode of Antonin Artaud and George Bataille. In all these examples, the aesthetic and the political are inseparable. The strongest instance of this might be Beuys installation of a *Büro für direkte Demokratie* (Office of the Organization for Direct Democracy) at *documenta 5* (see Beuys 1997, 2003). The installation took a consequential approach to turning art into a means of political education, even if it might be considered to have failed. Again and again, performance artists have hit or destroyed pianos, the classic symbol of bourgeois liberal arts education – one performance even involved throwing one off a factory roof (Götz 1994: 51). In feminist performance in particular (e.g., Carolee Schneemann), performance artists have metamorphosed constructs of identity or have displayed in all its horror bodily decay and the ruin of death.

On the one hand, performance art, and particularly its European manifestations, aimed at sparking social revolt. On the other hand, American event art embraced the desire to change society while also seeking to overcome cultural identity and the self. This bears similarities to what the late Martin Heidegger called an asceticism of "Gelassenheit," or "releasement," in the sense of an "openness to the mystery" (Heidegger 1959: 55). Thus, performance could be radical social critique, engaging the aesthetic to explode historical social orders, and it could be a critique of Western culture with its traditional metaphysical dichotomies that, for centuries, determined thinking, feeling, and acting. For instance, Cage's *Empty Words* (1974) involved reading, for hours on end, a text while gradually omitting sentences, phrases, words, and syllables, stripping language down to sounds. At the premiere, which lasted into the dawn, the doors of the performance hall were left open so that the utterances mixed with the sounds of dawn. The event is unique, but does not involve any expression of choice or preference. Everything that happens is supposed to be registered as equally significant and dignified, irrespective of what it is or could be. It is this singularity of contingency that distinguishes performance from the singularity of improvisatory inspiration. The performance strives for an approach to reality different from the compulsion to

shape things by not underscoring, assessing, or altering, but simply *letting be*. Thus, performance cannot be described with concepts like production or *poiesis*, because it necessitates an unconditional surrender to *what shows itself*, independent of how it shows itself or what its appearances implies (see Mersch 2002c). In contrast, excluding a phenomenon, even it just be the exclusion of a non-occurrence or silence, is always a decision that constitutes a differentiation. The decision relies on criteria that stamp upon the world the sign of one's own subjective choice – a subjectivity that finds its utmost freedom in improvisation, and particularly in free jazz. Performative events, instead, cannot entirely be directed; though staged, their course cannot be charted; though constructed, they cannot be engineered. Rather, they arise and disappear in the moment of their constitution (see Mersch 1997).

3 On the Theory of Performance

As performance art gained in significance and became increasingly international in the 1960s and 1970s, establishing itself as an important aesthetic form of the late 20th and early 21st- centuries, theories about it started developing – with a lag of about twenty years. Theories of performance art highlighted above-discussed attributes like unpredictability, uniqueness, and the impossibility of documenting the event. Also, what interested theorists was performance art's disruptive politics, its transgressive dimension. In her trailblazing text *The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction*, Peggy Phelan wrote:

> Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that the performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.
>
> *(Phelan 1993: 146)*

In short, performance exhausts itself in the moment of its manifestation. This is why Phelan focused on "disappearance," which resists conservation. Phelan notes that it is precisely the impossibility of repetition that makes performance compelling and gives it its political power, in the sense that it resists market circulation (Phelan 2004: 571). Unable to crystallize into a durable form, it rather offers a "gift" without demanding anything in return. It serves neither a use nor an exchange value: "Performance's independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically is its greatest strength" (Phelan 1993: 149).

At the same time, Phelan's analysis makes clear that comparisons between performance and improvisation do not really hold water. In contrast to the positivity of improvisational practices, performance engages in a "poetics of difference." Improvisation works to perpetuate itself, constantly inventing new forms. Performance, on the other hand, is about interruption – and resistance. Improvisation preserves the traces it leaves in order to refine them, while performance savors its own singularity and submits it to critique. Also, performance maintains a relation to its failure, because it does not repeat itself. Instead, it abides in the proximity of death, which constantly stirs up the desire to overcome. In performance, it all comes down to the experience of change, as Phelan continues:

> In live performance, the potential for the event to be transformed in unscripted ways by those participating (both the artists and the viewers) makes it more exciting to me. This is precisely where the liveness of performance art matters. Of course, a great number of performances do not approach this potential at all, and many spectators and performers have no interest in this

> aspect of the live event. But the possibility of mutual transformation of both the observer and the performer within the enactment of the live event is extraordinarily important, because this is the point where the aesthetic joins the ethical.
>
> *(Phelan 2004: 575)*

This touches on the other side of the theory of performance: its manifest relation to transgression. Performance derives its ethical dimension from transgression, which has become a central point of analysis in performance studies. Diana Taylor, a premiere performance theorist, believes that an all-encompassing theory of performance is impossible; because performance is truly "unstable," she writes, it resists general definitions (see Taylor 2016b: 373). But its evanescence only exists by virtue of its retroactivity – a key tenet of deconstruction. This makes talking about an "ontology" of performance just as problematic as ontologizing art or the creative act. At best, theories of performance must remain satisfied with cataloging its plurality, as Henry Bial and Sarah Brady write in their introduction to *The Performance Studies Reader*: "Just as performance is contingent, contested, hard to pin down, so too is its study" (Bial and Brady 2016: 1). Every attempt at theorizing performance has to confront the dilemma of doing justice to live performance while at the same time conceptualizing it within a discourse that, by necessity, cannot. Thus, some have even debated whether an adequate "theory of performance" is at all possible (Arthur 2012: 22 f.). However, this characteristic, paradoxically, is precisely what, in turn, gives the aesthetics of performance its authority while also guaranteeing that every theorization of performance will fail.[7]

Despite these difficulties, it is remarkable that most approaches to performance theory tend to totalize performance in an attempt to establish it as a paradigm for studying cultural practices more generally. It turns "performativity" into a universal category. After all, the "performative turn" discussed since the early 1990s denotes first and foremost the transfer of the concept to cultural studies, literary studies, media studies, sociology, economics, and other sciences; thus, theories of the performative have gradually transmuted into a general framework. Common approaches are the anthropology and ritual theory of Victor Turner and J. L. Austin's speech act theory, as well as certain post-structuralist and feminist philosophies, primarily those of Judith Butler and Jacques Derrida. Canonical texts range from Turner's *Betwixt and Between* (Turner 1969) and Austin's *How to Do Things with Words* (Austin 1975) to Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (Goffman 1959) or theories of face-to-face communication, gender theory, and discourse analysis. Theories of performance have drawn on other theories that were prominent at their respective times but, while each underscored different aspects of the performative, all of them missed something. For instance, in the late 1960s, most theories of performance focused on happenings and the Fluxus Movement, without, however, subjecting them to a detailed aesthetic analysis. In the late 1970s and 1980s, in contrast, they rallied to linguistics and the philosophy of language, working with texts by Ludwig Wittgenstein, Austin, and John Searle; these thinkers' ideas, in turn, were molded into an entire philosophy of communication by Jürgen Habermas (see Habermas 1984 1: 75–101 and 2: 3–42), which centered mainly on the intrinsic rationality of actions in contrast to the irregularities of individual interactions.

Ten years later, concepts of performance have become dominant tools in a broader critique of culture and society. This is particularly true for deconstruction and queer theory. Thus, Jacques Derrida criticized Searle's conventionalism in speech act theory by pointing out the subversive potential of repetition and quotation, which reaches beyond the bounds of preformed normative decisions (Derrida 1988). In her book *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, Judith Butler took this position even further by analyzing how insulting epithets like "gay" and "queer" can be appropriated by the intended targets and turned into statements of pride and protest (Butler 1997). In earlier writings like *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter* (Butler 1990a, 1993), Butler grappled with how performative acts and statements could affect reality, arguing that "gender" is

constituted through certain bodily practices. Butler has analyzed in painstaking detail the strong connection between performance and subjectification. By adapting and reconfiguring clichéd behaviors, by transgressing and altering stereotypes, new identities can be created and old identities transformed (Butler 1990b: 271). This position fits with Shoshana Felman's critique of performativity, when she recalls that promises can be broken and that, in her example of Don Juan's promises to marry, language does *not* always do what it says (Felman 2003).

Feminist theories of performativity, in particular, have engaged with the evanescence of performative acts and have emphasized its significance. After all, actions are described as performative not only when they symbolize or represent something, but when they create or effectuate something that they themselves *are not*. This efficacy is less about producing something in the sense of the Ancient Greek *poiein* and more about the act of embodiment that produces by "positing." According to Sybille Krämer, this concept of performativity can be understood in a "weak," "strong," or "radical" sense. The weak sense draws on Searle's concept of "illocution" by recognizing an act carried out through speech in the conventional sense. The strong sense denotes a performative act that constitutes something in the world that cannot be taken back. Finally, the radical concept of performativity views it as an act of practical critique that invalidates dominant classifications through interventions and recoding common behaviors and conventions (Krämer and Stahlhut 2001). In this radical sense, performative acts experiment with "uprisings." They devalue or "dis-place" dominant usages in a way that approximates activism: "Breaking norms is the norm of performance," Diana Taylor writes accordingly in her short text *Performance* (Taylor 2016a: 71). Performance does not create "in doing," but "by doing," by reversing, splitting, and necessitating transformation.

Above all, it was French and American theories of performance that detailed the nuances of this double sense of performativity. They were concerned less with performance's aesthetic dimension and more with its relationship to the "power matrices" of the political: "Performance is not always about art. It's a wide-ranging and difficult practice to define and holds many at time conflicting meanings and possibilities. […] [P]erformance can be understood as process – as enactment, exertion, intervention, and expenditure" (Taylor 2016a: 6 ff., passim), writes Taylor. These theories ushered in interpretations of the performative that shifted focus away from the present moment of the actual performance by situating it within a complex network of socially habituated, normative practices that performance at once seeks to disrupt, undermine, or cross out. They were interested not so much in the properties of the singular event, but in the field of embodied, structured practices targeted by the performance: "[P]erformance is always mediated" (Taylor 2016a: 58), Taylor continued, because "[w]e all know how to behave at a play, a concert, a funeral, or a political protest. We've learned by doing." But habituation also contains "the possibility of change, critique, and creativity within frameworks of repetition. […] Performance operates as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge, memory, and a sense of identity through reiterated actions." (Taylor 2016a: 19, 15, 25 passim) Rebecca Schneider argued in similar terms in her book *Theatre and History*. In the last chapter, "On Knives and Blood," which deals with Abramović's performances, she riffs on the seeming difference between real life and staged act in order to underscore how artificial performances can have just as powerful effects as convulsive confrontations with reality. (Schneider 2014: 70 ff.) In her analysis, their affective foundations are the same, so that performance and the conditions that can give rise to it should be considered just as real or even realer than terrifying moments in reality: while we experience the latter in "raw" form, the former hits us in a mode of reflection, which "proves the more powerful weapon upon the 'real' than any knife or any blood" (Schneider 2014: 75).

Beyond this dichotomy between the supposed authenticity of shock and the anti-essentialist critique of immediacy, which sees art's real potential in the epistemic parameters of construction and artifice, Erika Fischer-Lichte drew on her background in theatre studies and on the theories

of Victor Turner to shine light on a middle way. She describes performance's transformative force as part of processes of "liminality" characteristic of social rituals (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 175–200; 2012: 113 ff.). Engaging with theatrical and social performances, she compares similarities between art and human existence. Performance is not exhausted in acts of staging something; rather, every act of staging is performative. Moreover, every act is situated in a liminal process that at the same time holds it in suspense. This transitional state allows for the "emergence" of other forms of acting, other forms of acts to come. In performative scenes, Fischer-Lichte writes, "new social situations arise" (Fischer-Lichte 2012: 88). Instead of placing primacy on the *passio*, the "passing" of the event, Fischer-Lichte therefore analyzes how performances both "determine" their own direction while "allowing themselves to be determined" (see Seel 2002). In doing so, she emphasizes the simultaneity of *intentio* and *improvisio* in performance, which opens space both for aleatory effects and for intentional, calculated interventions. Performance cannot be totally governed, even when carried out under extreme discipline like Abramović did, nor is performance an intangible, unanalyzable run of events. Fischer-Lichte treats both sides as correlates. Correspondingly, cultural dynamics can never be wholly planned and anticipated, a point that Fischer-Lichte captures with the concept of "ambivalence." Still, social realities are always composed of both the subjectivity of actions and the objectivity of the things and conditions that define every situation. Thus, Fischer-Lichte accounts for the indeterminacy and alterity of performance with the concept of "emergence" (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 138–60; 2012: 75 ff.), borrowed in part from systems theory. However, the notion of "emergence" signifies a statistical line of reasoning that is less focused on "radical" breaks, and more on relative "unpredictability," a line of reasoning that adheres to the logic of probability. Statistical predictions are based on mathematical concepts, i.e., regularities that define them as statistical quantities. From this perspective, the performative and its eventfulness appear as properties of a system. The theoretical model, hence, defines events as complex sets of relations to which the performative and descriptions of it are subordinated. For them, performativity would address nothing but processes of relational transcoding, which refuses both a clear and complete reconstruction of its causality as well as a complete analysis of its consequences. In opposition to this, the "eventfulness" of performance means something more radical. It does not concern relations, but stems from the singularity of intervening differences.

4 Performance and Difference

Indeed, Fischer-Lichte's definition holds if one primarily concentrates on staged performances of the theatrical sort (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 24–37 and 181–90). From this perspective, performance appears as an autopoetic event where the emergent effects follow out of audience members' unpredictable reactions (Fischer-Lichte 2012: 78). Here, too, the difference between performance and improvisation becomes apparent. Improvisation cannot be described as a practice that enables emergence, nor is it a "liminal" process or has any ethical impact. Improvisation is not a means of social or cultural critique, nor is it a strategy of self-affirmation, because "transformative power," in the words of Fischer-Lichte, "consists in creating a social reality that did not exist before, and to initiate effects that can transform those involved in various ways" (Fischer-Lichte 2012: 71). Both cultural practices maintain different relationships to rules, their violation, norms, and lawfulness. Improvisation does not annul rules. Instead, it unleashes their intrinsic potential and pushes their limits. It works with a repertoire of rules that it constantly expands. In contrast, an aspect of "anarchy" or unlawfulness inheres in performance. Performative acts displace reality through cuts and differences and turn that reality and participants into something other. Thus, performance has a more radical tenor than the suddenness, surprise, and intensity of improvisation. It does not travel the same path as the overflows of autonomous inspiration; indeed, it does not necessarily adhere to the mutual dynamics of "determining" and "allowing oneself to be determined."

Rather, performance relies on "disruption," on making the positing of difference into an event. But if the interdependent play of intentionality and non-intentionality is the starting point, then every disruption can only be understood as a sovereign act. This is the case for improvisation. On the other hand, performance gives much more space to the event, to that which cannot be commanded, than the dialectic of *actio* and *passio* allows. Even though it does contain aspects of will or decision, what is more significant for performance is that which remains undecidable and resists the demands of the will.

Austin's performative theory of speech acts, which remains the most thoroughly developed of any, reveals an insurmountable ambiguity that offers occasion to reassess its canonical interpretations by Searle, Habermas, and others. Disruption or "the occurrence of difference as an event" has two senses, at least in language. First, it means that performative acts can "succeed" or "fail" because they are rooted in social conventions. But on the other hand, it means that they need these norms, because they are exposed to a number of changes on account of the fact that their situational embeddedness is never complete. Thus, Austin distinguished between two forms of performative speech acts: "illocutions," which accomplish an act "in saying," and "perlocutions," which accomplish it "by saying" (see Austin 1975: 121–32). The two prepositions indicate different pragmatic trajectories. "In saying" means that the entire act is fulfilled in the utterance, whereas the consequences an act initiated "by saying" are no longer in the speaker's control. One might say that in the first case, utterances execute actions, insofar as the utterance posits a real effect that aligns with its meaning, while in the second case, the real effects initiated by the speech act fold back into it and alter it, thus giving it a sense retroactively. This reflects the fact that we usually know neither the true meaning of an utterance nor what its practical consequences will be. Not knowing what we have done leads to the familiar circumstance of awkwardly trying to explain what we meant through cascades of new utterances and helps explain the difficulty of apologizing for its consequences and repairing the damages it caused. Thus, creativity in illocutionary speech involves play with rules and variations – like in improvisation – as every utterance takes place within a social setting.

In perlocutionary speech acts, in turn, something much more radical takes place that is highly relevant for theories of both performative acts and the aesthetics of performance art, but which most theories of performativity tend to leave by the wayside. This radicality consists in the fact that an act is determined not by itself, but by its other, its context, its surroundings, and its consequences. Thus, its meaning is not – or is not exclusively – a function of intentionality, but of its setting, its "ecology." Austin's often underestimated thoughts on the "perlocutionary" come close to saying precisely this, because the prefix "per" – *through* – refers to a difference as the key moment of withdrawal in performative mediations; in other words, the medium always irrevocably alters that which passes through it. Searle, who claims to have authentically reproduced and analytically clarified Austin's speech act theory (Searle 1969), states that the medial components of the performative are the "constitutive" and "regulative rules" that modulate speech acts. But the "per" of "perlocution," as the "per" in "performance," indicates that an act is always altered *through* (per) the situation in which it is carried out. Certainly, acts are realized *through* (per) their execution, making it difficult to distinguish clearly between praxis and performativity. But the distinction between an act in itself and its actual execution is a fiction. Rather, practices are only ever realized *through their execution*. However, then there is the question of what "in" or "through" its execution means. The philosophy of language limits itself to analyzing the execution of acts as a function of the practical modalities of language.[8] Instead, every execution of an act is singular because the entirety of the situation in which it takes place affects and shapes it. Describing an act, therefore, necessitates studying the situation, the occasion, and the dispositive elements that constitute it. Similarly, only by retroactively analyzing an act's effects is it possible to discern its meaning and significance. Thus, no act is entirely determined by how it is carried out. Rather,

the opposite holds: the framework in which an act takes place is what makes up what it "will have become." After all, a performative act is not just composed of the various habits and media that realize it. The unique reality in which it happens mediates its practical execution. Indeed, the execution of an action necessitates repetition and practice, as Diana Taylor and Rebecca Schneider have often reminded us, but no mode of carrying out an act is complete in itself, because the totality of circumstances and temporal factors always determine in part how it will be executed. In this sense, it is always, in some way, singular. This means that every praxis is mediated and transformed by how it is performed. At the same time, how it transforms cannot be well captured, because the medial brings forth phenomena by disappearing, and it disappears by bringing forth (see Mersch 2008).

Beyond the "illocutionary force" (Searle) of performatives, the analysis of their situatedness underscores their genuinely transformative effects and their unpredictability. "Critical" theories of performativity have insisted on this point. But at the same time, it demonstrates that the transformation of practice cannot itself be determined or governed by performances. Rather, performances themselves are haunted by a difference that undercuts intentions and sovereignty. This undercutting is caused by what might be called, in a metaphorical sense, the "general perlocutionary nature of the performative," which applies beyond language. It denotes the notion that performative acts always slip out of the control of the actor and escape their intentions (Mersch 2003, 2004). Every act in the real *happens* such that it is impossible to totally complete or regulate the event; it happens without us always being able to grasp its effects. Rather, the conditions of the situation and consequences of the act, which are never "authorized" by those who execute it, are that *through* (per) which a practice "becomes" what it is. In this sense, practical events escape the narrow grasp of intentionality. As Hannah Arendt rightly stated: "[W]e start something. We weave our strand into a network of relations. What comes of it we never know. […] That is true of all action" (Arendt 2003: 21).

Therefore, there is no match, no consistency, no identity, but only a rift, a withdrawal. Only sometimes it becomes clear in retrospect what an action was, but mostly it is lost in a darkness of vanishing consequences, which it snatches from our control in order to forever close it off to comprehensibility. This is what I call the "performative *différance*." The way in which practice and performance belong together *is* this incessant transformation, this otherness. Never "whole" or "full," the "per" always remains fractured and contains an irreducible division in itself. This also means that performatives do more than create realities. They undermine themselves because of the fact that, from the very beginning, a *diabolon* – the sign of a fundamental conflict – is inscribed in them *through* their *symbolon*, their content.

It is this genuine two-sidedness and fragility that makes the social existence of actions precarious. It is also responsible for the fact that they are never that which they claim to be. They always seemed to be alienated or "diverted" in the sense of *katastrophē*. This aspect of performatives is where the real philosophical depth of the now fifty-year-old topic lies, because the category of the performative opens up a series of ethical and epistemological questions that are, due to their "perlocutionary" dimension, hard to delimit. Performatives are never in our hands: transforming themselves at the moment of their execution, they escape mastery and leave behind an irreversible trace in the things and events that follow them. Thus, performatives are at once chronically excessive *and* overdetermined. This does not just follow from the complexity of their contexts and the unpredictability of their future effects. Rather, it has to do with the tendency of their mediality to slip away. Beyond rules and their transgression, performatives lack foundations and remain uncanny. They have a "tragic" aspect because they imply that no praxis can be certain about its reason and aims, which correlates with the impossibility of grasping all elements involved in the situation of their execution and the

impossibility of estimating all of their potential effects. This also implies that an irreducible "irrationality" inheres in all human activity. The performativity of the act makes it impossible to bridge this gap. For this reason, one might speak of a *general lack of accountability* insofar as we can never fully account for our actions even though we are always responsible for them in every respect. Performance art reveals this principle unaccountability.

As a consequence, our approach to the world should change. These insights necessitate the adoption of what recent French philosophy has termed the virtue of "passibility." The concept signifies not just the necessity of our actions "becoming passive" – it also calls for the development of the ability to embrace the passive as an experience of our own powerlessness. It in no way means that people should refuse to take a stand or a position on matters, and it does not excuse one from responsivity and responsibility. Rather, it emphasizes a de-subjectification that deduces the effects of the performative exclusively from its negativity and difference, not from intention. It opposes the manifest subjectivism characteristic of much philosophy since the early modern period. The enduring success of performance art since the 1960s is its artistic corollary.

However, with all of this comes permanent doubt and the necessity of revision, giving at the end also the topic of performativity and improvisation a new turn: the impossibility of anticipating the effects of action, its lack of accountability, and its "irrationality" force us to treat our actions with reservation. At the same time, our actions prove to be chronically provisional. In turn, their tentativeness calls for improvisatory compensation. Because performativity leaves action "lacking," never entirely "whole," and divided by an irreducible difference and incompleteness, action requires improvisation in the sense of unpredictability. That is why an indispensability of the improvisational follows from what was called the "performative *différance*." Thus, both performativity and improvisation are not interdependent. Rather, they are juxtaposed with one another. They supplement one another as corresponding forms of creativity, and, at the same time, they repel one another, because the incompleteness of performance requires provisional, temporary measures, and in turn, the provisional only takes on a real shape through its enactment in performance.

(Translated by Adam Bresnahan)

Notes

1 On performance see the eponymous documentary film by Jeff Dupre and Matthew Akers: *Marina Abramović. The Artist is Present*, 2012. See also: Taylor 2016a: 58 ff.
2 The essay grapples with the difference between work and performance.
3 "I construct a five-pointed star (made of wood and wood chips soaked in 100 litres of petrol). I set fire to the star. I walk around it. I cut my hair and throw the clumps into each point of the star. I cut my toe-nails and throw the clippings into each point of the star. I walk into the star and lie down on the empty surface. Lying down, I fail to notice that the flames have used up all the oxygen. I lose consciousness. The viewers do not notice, because I am supine. When a flame touches my leg and I still show no reaction, two viewers come into the star and carry me out of it. I am confronted with my physical limitations, the performance is cut short. Afterwards I wonder how I can use my body – conscious and otherwise – without disrupting the performance" (Abramović 1974).
4 On the various actions see Jappe 1993.
5 See https://www.theartstory.org/artist/cage-john/artworks/ (accessed June 20, 2020).
6 "This is a play nobody must come and see. That is, the not-coming of anyone makes the play. […] No one must be told not to come. […] But nobody must come, or there is no play" (Filliou 1967: 17).
7 "None of the […] theories […] can be seen as prototypical in the sense that all […] phenomena and processes defined as performative might be unproblematically subsumed under them," writes Erika Fischer-Lichte (2012: 37).
8 Donald Davidson calls the performative dimension of utterances "mood-setters" (Davidson 2001: 119–20).

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IMPROV, STAND-UP, AND COMEDY

Clément Canonne

1 Introduction

In a recent blog post on improvised theater, improviser and director Michael Such criticized what he sees as the lack of aesthetic diversity in London's so-called "improv scene." According to him,

> improv is frequently billed as comedy. […] But, personally, given one attraction of improv is 'anything can happen,' I wish there were more improv shows which left me feeling sad, horrified or even bored. I wish there were more improv shows which looked and sounded radically different.[1]

According to Such, then, improvisers could (and should) explore a much wider variety of dramatic genres, over and beyond comedy. But why is this so rarely the case? How do we explain the fact that improvised theater, as an autonomous art form – and not just as a tool for actor development or as an ingredient parsimoniously sprinkled over mostly scripted material – has often been associated with comedy, from the 16th-century Commedia dell'Arte to the performances of the Chicago-based theater troupe Second City?[2] Is there some privileged connection between improvisation and comedy?

There are probably many reasons that could explain why improvisation is often associated with comedy, from socioeconomic reasons (e.g., comedy shows tend to attract bigger audiences; improv classes are often used as a springboard for a career as a writer or performer in TV comedy shows)[3] to cultural-historical ones (e.g., the lingering idea that improvisation, being intrinsically linked to an oral tradition, could only suit "low" theatrical genres, such as comedy).[4] In this chapter, I would like to suggest a series of specifically aesthetic arguments that could explain why improvisation tends, more often than not, to be funny. Of course, improvised theatrical performances are not necessarily funny (Halpern et al. 1994:8), if only because they sometimes simply fail to be so. However, I will argue here that the specific features of the creative process in improvisation have the intrinsic potential to elicit comic amusement, even though elements inherent to the improvisation process that are conductive to humor can be overcome, with some additional effort, to effectively create responses other than laughter. While this idea may come across as provocative, echoes of it can in fact be found in the writings of many improvisers. For instance, in TJ & Dave's *Improvisation at the Speed of Life*, the improvisers share how

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> when asked how to be funny in improvisation, we answer, 'Be honest.' To us, improvisation does not mean being funny. It means being human – or better yet, just being […]. *Comedy is a mere byproduct of our approach to improvisation*, and a byproduct is not pursuable
>
> *(Jagodowski et al. 2015: 64 f., my emphasis)*

Similarly, the authors of *Truth in Comedy* – a well-known improvisation manual – state that, while

> one of the biggest mistakes an improviser can make is attempting to be funny […], still, [the audience] laugh. It is a side effect of attempting something more beautiful, honest, and truthful, something that has far more to do with the theatre – which puts your attention on what is important about being a human in a community.
>
> *(Halpern et al. 1994: 13 f.)*

How can we explain, then, that the overall result of an improvised show tends to be funny *just by having the performers truly and sincerely improvise*?

To further explore the connection between improvisation and comedy, I will first show in which way collective theatrical improvisation relates to the different mechanisms that are at play in humorous situations. I will then argue that the very constraints of improvisation make it easier for improvised performances to aim for comedic results. Finally, by focusing specifically on improvised aspects of stand-up comedy, I will examine the extent to which such connections between improvisation and comedy depend on the specifics of theatrical art forms.

2 Improvisation and the Traditional Theories of Humor

In this section, I will examine the connection between improvisation and comedy by focusing on the specific case of improv. Improv is not a genre per se; it is rather an umbrella term to refer to the trend of largely unscripted group performances (albeit generally based on a simple audience suggestion as a starting point) that emerged throughout the 20th century, from the early experiments of Viola Spolin with theater games in the 1940s (Spolin 1999) and the influential work of The Compass or Second City in Chicago in the 1950s (Coleman 1990) all the way to the international dissemination of improv through Keith Johnstone's Theatersports (Johnstone 1999) and Del Close's Harold – a loose structure for long-form improvisation that is now used all over the world (Fotis 2014).[5] My aim in this first section is to show how such collective and unscripted theatrical practice – which has been associated with comedy from its early days – relates to the main available theories of humor, beyond the obvious aesthetic diversity to be expected in such a wide and international scene.

It is standard to distinguish four main theories of humor (see Carroll 2014) – namely the "superiority" theory, the "incongruity" theory, the "release" theory, and the "play" theory. My goal here is not to defend one over the other or to argue which one can better explain the widest range of humorous situations. Following Lintott (2016), who argues for a non-essentialist reading of the "standard" theories of humor, I will instead take those theories as presenting different (combinable) mechanisms that can all play a more or less important role in finding something funny[6] (or as different paths that can elicit, in the appropriate context, comic amusement) and show how the mechanisms that underlie these four theories are a constitutive part of the creative process of collective improvisation itself. Along the way, I will provide examples taken from a series of shows that took place in Washington D.C. during FIST 2017 – a competition of improvised theater that occurs every year at the Washington Improv Theater – which I attended in the context of an ethnographic research project on improv.[7]

Let us begin with the "superiority" theory. Different formulations of this theory have been offered but the general idea is that we tend to find situations that reinforce our own sense of superiority funny (e.g., seeing someone behaving in an awkward fashion or offering a dumb answer to a given question). A first reason why theatrical improvisation might be funny, then, would be its potential to trigger a feeling of superiority in its audience members. Many burlesque scenes in improvised theater seem to rely on the kind of comical resources suggested by the "superiority" theory, for example by having the improvisers perform exaggerated or ridiculous gestures and pantomimes. Yet, there is nothing specific to improvisation in such scenes, as they could very well be found in fully scripted contexts. However, contrary to what happens with scripted and well-rehearsed performances – where all the performers know at every moment what is happening on stage – audience members of improvised performances are often placed in a position of *epistemic superiority*. They tend to have access to more information than each individual performer – which, in turn, can elicit a humorous experience at the expense of some of the performers. Indeed, because of the polyphonic and multimodal nature of collective theatrical improvisation (which combines both speech and gestures), multiple things can happen at the same time in different parts of the stage. As such, it is not unusual for audience members to be the only ones with access to the whole picture. In a scene observed during FIST 2017, three performers had a conversation on the side about the hallucinations one of them had when playing to a certain game as a kid – he kept seeing a butterfly, which was like an imaginary lover for him. At one point, the fourth performer, who was not a part of this scene and had lagged behind, started to mime the motions of butterfly wings and slowly approached the other three performers. The audience laughed precisely at that moment because they knew that the scene was going to change direction *before* the other three performers. In other words, the audience relishes knowing that the improvisers did not know what was about to happen. Still, one could argue that it is not unusual for theater audience of scripted performances to be in a state of epistemic superiority vis-à-vis the *characters* that are portrayed by the actors on stage. But here, in an improvisatory setting, this state of epistemic superiority extends to the *performers* themselves, which, arguably makes things even more enjoyable.

We now need to examine improvised theater through the lens of the "incongruity" theory. According to this theory, "[W]hat is key to comic amusement is a deviation from some presupposed norm – that is to say, an anomaly, or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be" (Carroll 2014: 17). Such incongruities are generally considered to be a key comical resource in improvised theater, and the idea of collective improvisation as a situation that favors the emergence of "unusual things" can be found in many improvisation manuals. The *Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual*, for example, states that:

> Once the base reality is established, both improvisers should be listening for anything that would be unusual, interesting, or out of the ordinary given this context. The first unusual thing should always stand out in contrast to the base reality. Don't put pressure on yourself to be funny in the very first line of an Organic Scene. In other words, don't force the first unusual thing.
>
> *(Besser et al. 2013: 71)*

Because they do not play from a script, and because they cannot predict what the next move is going to be, improvisers often unwillingly create incongruities or inconsistencies, for example, when speaking at the same time and offering statements that are perhaps not in accordance with one another.[8] More generally, the high flexibility and high fluidity of improv – in which a given performer can spontaneously decide to portray a different character or to start a new scene in a new location – are a constant source of emergent incongruities, because it is not necessarily

immediately clear for everyone on stage who the new character is supposed to be or what the new setting is supposed to be. For example, in a scene observed during FIST 2017, one of the performers was on his knees, because he was acting out a scene where he was in confession with a priest, but when the "priest" performer was replaced by a new performer – thus signaling the beginning of a new scene – the "confessed" performer suddenly ended up being on his knees in front of the father of the woman he was supposed to marry. The two performers immediately took advantage of this unintended incongruity (why would someone kneel in front of his future father-in-law?) to improvise a funny scene in which they further explored what the reasons could be for these two characters to be in this situation.

Thirdly, what are the connections between improvisation and the "release" theory of humor? According to some formulations of this theory, humor is a matter of releasing built up expectations:

> when we are told a joke, it might be said, naturally enough, that expectation builds as we await the punchline. We are curious about how this comic discourse will end. When the punchline arrives, the pressure of those expectations is released and laughter ensues.
>
> *(Carroll 2014: 39)*

Obviously, collective theatrical improvisation is a very challenging process, as performers have to create individual scenes on the spot, all the while aiming to maintain a certain degree of overall coherence. Because they have to start from scratch (or nearly) each time they go on stage, it can take some time and a fair amount of struggle before they can figure out what their scene will be about. As such, part of the pleasure and enjoyment taken in improvised theater stems from the relief and excitement the audience members can have when they see the improvisers finally managing to "find the game of their scene." One example may help illustrate the temporal dynamics at play in many improvised scenes: At the beginning of a scene performed during FIST 2017, one of the improvisers was miming the gesture of grabbing a fruit from a tree, while a second performer, it seemed, pretended to be in a car. The performers, thus, appeared to be in two different spaces – a difficult situation to start with. However, after a few lines of dialogue between the two improvisers, the "driving" performer found a solution to this problematic situation by making it clear to everyone that she was not driving a car, but a slowly moving tractor, thereby giving a certain consistency to the scene – an ingenious solution that immediately made the audience laugh.

It should also be noted that the "release" mechanism is typically combined with the "superiority" mechanism in some performance strategies made possible by the improvised setting. For example, a very common strategy is to allow for some degree of (friendly) antagonism in the improvisers' relationship on stage. Many improvisation manuals start with the idea that performers should "yes, and…" each other, which means that performers should build on each other's suggestions to improvise their scene and, more generally, that they should always collaborate in the greater interest of making the scene work. However, seasoned improvisers often go beyond this ground rule to favor what could be called a "yes, but…" approach to improvisation. A standard move within this approach is to deliberately put a fellow improviser in a difficult position, knowing that she will probably find a way to deal with it. For example, in a scene observed during FIST 2017, one performer explained that he changed his name bit by bit over the course of his life from "Breburt" to "Blaze Thunder," and his co-improviser asked him straight away: "and in between, it was…?," thus forcing his scene partner to come up with a plausible interpolation process between the two names. Such situations typically involve both the "superiority" and the "release" mechanism: we first laugh *at* the performer who is trapped in an awkward situation; and we laugh a second time *with* her when she takes up the gauntlet and finally pulls the fat out of the fire with a clever move.

Finally, I would like to reflect on the connection between improv and what Carroll calls the "play" theory, which highlights the playful and often ludic nature of humor. Not all ludic activities are necessarily funny. Nguyen (2019), for example, discusses the case of the game *Sign*, in which players have to communicate through made-up signs to convey the "inner truth" they have been assigned. According to Nguyen, "the experience of the game is remarkable; it is intense, absorbed, frustrating, and surprisingly emotional." There clearly is nothing funny here – quite the contrary, in fact. However, there is probably a deeper connection between certain *kinds* of games – or certain aspects of ludic activities – and humor. For instance, children's pretend play is generally an occasion for humorous interactions and laughter, something that has already been noted by the influential psychologist of child development Jean Piaget (see Schultz 1976). If pretend play is funny, it is mainly because of how it plays with very loose representational constraints, allowing the ludic exploration of both misnaming processes (calling a cat a dog) and representational discrepancies. In that perspective, it could be argued that improv, with its invisible props, imaginary settings and fictional identities, is related to such forms of pretend play.

According to David Saltz (2017), theatrical art forms as a whole rely on this kind of a *ludic* mode of representation: in principle, every action on stage can represent any other. Most of the time, the audience is able to make sense of what is happening on stage, because, first, they have some prior (minimal) knowledge of the fictional narrative enacted by the actors on stage, and, second, material elements of the scenography (costumes, accessories, theater decor, etc.), or physical attributes of the cast distribution guide the audience in decoding the meaning of the visual events happening on stage. However, such resources are not standardly available in improv. Indeed, all these elements could be seen as *material scripts*, which would constrain the range of possible situations or orient the improvisers in a given direction, prior to any action performed on stage. Moreover, the flexibility required by improvisation – for example, the fact that new characters might be needed as the scene develops – makes it impossible to have a rigid cast distribution. As such, improv can be seen as relying on representational processes that are both ludic (anything can represent anything and, more importantly, anyone can represent anyone) and performative (everything exists on stage just by saying it does): a *super-ludic* mode of representation, so to speak. In that perspective, improvised theater is indeed very much like children's pretend play, which also relies heavily on performative utterances. It could be objected that the kind of theatrical minimalism that allows this super-ludic mode of representation is not specific to improv. Nonetheless, such minimalism is probably at its highest and most flexible in improv. It can be actively used as a resource by performers to produce comical effects, by exaggerating, for example, the discrepancies between what the audience sees and what is supposed to be represented on stage (average-looking men will act as beautiful women, young people will transform alternatively into seniors or children, etc.) or by introducing incongruous elements into the "base reality" that has been created (e.g., by suddenly transporting a character to Mars). More importantly, the combination of theatrical minimalism (performers are not strongly identified with a unique, well-defined character in this fictional reality) and improvisation (the audience knows that the performers themselves are responsible for everything happening on stage) strongly reinforces the fuzziness of the performer/character distinction. This allows the improvisers to further play with this ambiguity, for example by performing actions or saying lines that can be understood to be both directed to their co-improvisers and/or to the characters they portray.[9]

Because of its polyphonic, unpredictable, processual, and super-ludic nature, collective improvisation provides the performers with a certain number of comical resources that emerge more or less spontaneously from the situation itself. Individually, each of these mechanisms is probably not sufficient in itself to explain why improv tends to be funny. But, first, all four main mechanisms that are responsible for humorous reactions are simultaneously present in improv, thus allowing for a synergy between them. And, second, all these mechanisms seem to appear in a somewhat

"heightened" version in situations of collective improvisation. Combined, these two observations certainly provide a stronger ground for the idea of a privileged connection between improv and comedy. Whether improvisers are just taking advantage of the comical effects produced by the unfolding of the improvisatory process or whether they are more actively seeking to provoke such effects, the resulting funny situations are created by using the resources of improvisation itself. In other words, the fact that improvisation, by its very nature, can easily provide the improvisers with many comical resources – resources that can then be more or less actively exploited to create funny situations – certainly plays an important role in explaining why the practice of improvised theater is so massively linked to comedy.

3 Improvisation is More Amenable to Comedy

In this section, I would like to pursue another argumentative strategy, and show that it is *easier* to achieve comedy through improvisation than, say, tragedy or romance, or, in other words, that improvisation is better suited for comedy. Hence, it would only be natural that, due to selection mechanisms and cultural optimization processes, improvised theater had evolved as an (almost exclusively) comedic art form.

First, as previously seen, an improvised performance is likely to give rise to numerous inconsistencies, "mistakes," or hesitations. The smooth integration of these into a performance would be much more difficult to achieve if the performers were aiming at something sad, scary, or epic because they would create emotional disengagement and prevent the audience from becoming absorbed within the fictional world enacted on stage. On the contrary, in a comedy-oriented context, these very same inconsistencies, mistakes, and hesitations become resources for the improvisers to make the audience laugh, by potentially triggering one of the main mechanisms that underlie humorous reactions (i.e., superiority, incongruity, or release).

Second, because of both the unpredictability and flexibility of improvised dynamics, there is (almost) no prior limit in the range of situations that can potentially arise in an improvised performance. In principle, then, there should be an equal distribution between "funny" situations and more "serious" situations in any given improvised performance. However, even if those two types of situations were equally likely to emerge in improv, there is still an asymmetry at play here. Any situation, even the most terrible and non-humorous, can be transformed into a comedy – just think of Roberto Benigni's *La vita è bella* or to the whole genre of "dark humor" or "black comedy" – while it is not clear that the same can be said of tragedy, epics, or romance. There is something fundamentally parasitic in comedy. It can thrive from almost anything, as attested to by the fact that many comedic devices are actually *transformational* processes (irony, caricature, deadpan, etc.). In other words, comedy is less about certain situations, characters, or topics than it is about a manner of presenting, enacting, and exploring such situations, characters, and topics, thereby triggering in the audience the "momentary anaesthesia of the heart" (Bergson 2005: 2 f.) that is so crucial for successfully achieving darker forms of humor.

Of course, pace Aristotle, tragedy itself is probably not limited to the representation of actions that have "some greatness about [them]" (*Poetics*, 1449b21–29), and many dramaturges have also explored the "tragedy of the banal." Note, however, how such theater plays are often best described as tragicomedies (Beckett's own English translation of *Waiting for Godot* is subtitled "a tragicomedy in two acts"), as if the banality of the situation inevitably introduces some irreducibly humorous elements. In that perspective, the fact that almost any situation can arise from improvisation is not a problem for comedic approaches of improvisation, but it might be a problem for genres of improvised theater that are aiming to give rise to other kinds of reactions in their audiences. In fact, such approaches generally resort to a much higher degree of pre-determination. Characters could be decided upon in advance, as could be the kinds of situations in which they are

to evolve: for example, the whole premise of the improv show *Clowns are not Funny* – referred to by Michael Such in the blog post quoted at the beginning of this chapter – is that performers act as clowns in a Ionesco-inspired setting. Similarly, scripting the overall framework of a scene while letting the performers improvise the dialogue could be used here, as in the method adopted by Mike Leigh in some of his films, such as *Life is Sweet*. Most "serious" improvised shows, thus, rely on a combination of improvised performance and scripted materials (synopsis, shared repertoire of characters and situations, cards filled out by members of the audience that serve as a basis for an improvised play after a very short time of collective discussion and preparation, etc.). As such, they are much closer to "structured" or "partial" improvisation than to full-fledged improvisation. The crucial point here is that there seems to be a trade-off between how unscripted the improvisers want their performances to be and the variety of emotions and responses that can be elicited. If the performers want to do a "serious" improvised show while refusing to script in advance the situations or characters that are going to fuel their performances, then they have to take the risk – rooted in the sheer unpredictability of the interactions – of getting "locked" into situations that do not suit their more "serious" purpose. Even companies such as Chicago's Theater Momentum[10] that strive to achieve "dramatic improv" acknowledge that their shows fold "elements of comedy and drama into the story in equal measure" and that the audience should not expect "something with literally no humorous moments." In short, while it is clear that improv is not bound to shallow comedy or cheap laughs and that it can also be deep and complex, it also seems quite difficult to eliminate laughing altogether from a successful improvised performance.

Third, improvisation is, most of the time, a performance art, something that is done on stage for the benefits of an audience. In other words, improvisers typically follow a twofold regulative ideal: to "(a) present [a performance] intended to be worth [watching], by (b) determining a significant number of its features as [they] play" (Brown 2000: 119). While there are theoretically many ways for the performers to entertain their audience while fully improvising, I would argue that comedy is perhaps the easiest way to satisfy such a twofold regulative ideal. This only holds when performers are actually aiming at having things both unscripted *and* intrinsically worth watching. Indeed, some strains of improvisation may follow different regulative ideals: for example, in Augusto Boal's *Theater of the oppressed*, improvisation is not seen as an end in itself but as a tool for finding solutions to both social and individual problems. In this kind of setting, performers are more inclined to take the risk of eliciting indifference, boredom, or even anger from their audience while exploring situations that are notoriously difficult to develop in improvisation, since their main goal is not to entertain the audience, but to create and promote social change (Leep 2008). It should also be noted that the performances following the principles of the *Theater of the oppressed* are often highly interactive, the "joker" (often an actor or the director) being in charge of coordinating the spontaneous interventions of the audience on stage with the improvised reactions of the performers. However, in more conventional settings, where a sharper distinction between performers and audience exists, the performers have to keep an eye on the actual *result* of their improvisation, and not focus only on the improvising process itself, which can be very rewarding for the performers but not necessarily for the audience.

With this in mind, many improv manuals plainly advise their readers to avoid doing certain things because they are too difficult to do well in improvisation. A series of contrasts are usually made between what can be done when improvising a performance and what can be done when scripting a theater play:

1 Improvisers should show rather than tell (Halpern et al. 1994: 53) – because enacting something takes advantage of both the gestural and verbal resources of the theatrical medium and, thus, gives improvisers more material to work with and more opportunities to find something interesting to develop.

2 Improvisers should explore a situation or a relationship rather than explore a plot – because "there is not pattern to ease the burden of creativity" when it comes to plot elaboration (Besser et al. 2013: 203).
3 Improvisers should favor the unusual over the routine (Besser et al. 2013: 84) – because it is easier for them to be interesting if they are working with a material or a situation that is itself remarkable.
4 Improvisers should favor scene development over scene exposition (Napier 2015: 107) – because it is difficult to adequately prepare for something that is not already planned.
5 Improvisers should favor agreement with each other over disagreement – because while disagreement can reveal interesting aspects of the characters, such nuanced exploration is typically difficult to manage and performers spending too much time on disagreeing only risk "to prevent something more interesting from happening" (Besser et al. 2013: 46.)

All these contrasts construe improvised theater as a hyper-dramatic artform. In other words, improvised theater seems to be at its most efficient – i.e., reaches an optimal equilibrium between the constraint of real-time creation and the constraint of audience entertainment – when performers focus almost exclusively on the dramatic (or action-related) aspects of the theatrical art form at the expense of its narrative (or story-related) aspects. Such focus inevitably constrains the range of results that improvisers might achieve. There cannot be tragedy without plot development but there can be comedy; there cannot be tragedy without conflict, but there can be comedy; there cannot be tragedy without the sense of a broader context than what is happening on stage but there can be comedy; etc.

Conversely, it seems much easier to map this hyper-dramatic improvisational process with some of the core features of comedy. In his paper on the comic vision of life, John Morreall (2014) suggests a characterization of comedy via an extended series of contrasts with tragedy. According to him, "comedy is based on the enjoyment of incongruity and so welcomes surprises," while "tragic heroes prefer the normal and routine" (130); "comic protagonists and audiences are comfortable amid disorder […], they do not require a unified plot or plot resolution," while "tragic heroes and audience crave order" (130); "comedy revels in multiple meanings: many interchanges between comic characters are based on their interpreting the same words in different ways," while "tragedy seeks linguistic and conceptual clarity: everything should have one interpretation, and so ambiguity is shunned" (130); "in comedy, events and courses of action can be interrupted, aborted, or started afresh," while "once a process begins in tragedy, it is carried to completion – there is no turning back or changing course" (132); or, to give a last example, one that Morreall borrows from Susan K. Langer, "the spirit of comedy is essentially contingent and episodic," while "the spirit of tragedy is closed [and] final" (133). It should be quite clear by now that such features are precisely a given of any improvised performance – even if those features in themselves are not enough to guarantee the emergence of a satisfying comedic performance. Improvisation, by its very nature, is bound to produce surprises, disorder, ambiguities, and interruptions – features that are all at the heart of comedy as a theatrical genre and, thus, play a central role in the expectations of comedy-attending audiences.

In short, to aim for a tragic result would be going against the grain of the improvisational process and, as such, would be a much more effortful and perilous endeavor. Again, it is not that narrative elaboration, description of past events, or psychological explorations are impossible to pursue in improvisation; it is simply that they are much more difficult to achieve than comedy through purely improvised means. If there is something such as a selection mechanism in the evolution of cultural and artistic practices, it is not surprising that improvised theater has ended up being associated almost exclusively with comedy, since it is arguably within the comedic ecosystem that improvisation can maximize its competitive advantage.

4 Humor and the Phenomenology of Improvisation

One important objection could be raised at this point. All the arguments discussed so far, in favor of a specific connection between improvisation and comedy, depend on the *collective* and *dramatic* nature of improv as an art form. It is the specific mix of, on the one hand, the flexibility and unpredictability of improvised interactions, and, on the other hand, the fictional consistency constraints and ludic modes of representation of theatrical art forms, that creates improv's comedic potential. In other words, improvisation *in itself* seems to be insufficient to guarantee the comedic potential of improv. Still, is there something intrinsically funny about improvisation, independent of the specifics of improv? Is there for example something intrinsically funny in an improvised solo performance that does not aim to represent (even minimally) some fictional world, but rather tells stories or speaks to an audience? Stand-up performances could here provide a case in point in order to answer these questions. While stand-up is sometimes mistaken for improv – and it certainly does not help that one of the most famous chain of comedy clubs in the US is simply called "The Improv" – it is in fact a fundamentally distinct art form. Improv is (mostly) a collective practice while stand-up is (mostly) a solo artistic practice; improv is (mostly) about enacting while stand-up is (mostly) about telling; and, last but not least, improv is (mostly) unscripted while stand-up is (mostly) scripted. The differences between improv and standup are often pointed out by improv practitioners, who typically insist on the importance of character work and listening skills in improv, whereas standup is more seen as "delivering blows" and building up the performer's persona.[11] Now, if stand-up is mostly a scripted art form – stand-up performers often refine their bits over the course of a long process of trial and error in which they progressively improve both the material itself and the way it is delivered in front of an audience – this does not necessarily mean that it is totally alien to improvisation.

First, some parts of a stand-up act, such as crowd work, are generally improvised, even if they may also rely heavily on previously elaborated stock material. In crowd work, the audience serves as a (more or less responsive) scene partner. Such moments are often crucial when the performer tries to connect with her audience. It is of high importance when it comes to reinforcing the feeling of a live and unique show, with the audience and the performer both contributing to making the performance *that* very performance.

Second, most stand-up acts generally allow for some (controlled) degree of interactivity. Members of the audience will, thus, sometimes interject unexpected comments or reactions that force the performer to deviate from her routine and to adapt her set to this spontaneous "offer." This aspect is clearest when performers have to deal with so-called hecklers, audience members that strongly disrupt the act by being loud or making inappropriate comments. Some performers are particularly well-known for their mastery in handling hecklers, to the point that the audience seems to especially relish these antagonistic moments between the stand-up artist and the hecklers. For example, stand-up artist Steve Hofstetter's videos of improvised interactions with hecklers have attracted millions of views on YouTube, far more than any of his more traditional stand-up excerpts.

Third, and more recently, fully improvised stand-up has emerged as a distinct art form, a kind of hybrid between improv and stand-up performance. An act of improvised stand-up can consist entirely of unscripted crowd work or improvised jokes, stories, or sketches based on audience suggestions or on topics that are revealed one by one to the performer and which are, thus, discovered at the same time both by the audience and the performer. While improvised stand-up is still an emerging art form, comedians such as Andrew Schulz have become well known for performing fully unscripted sets, and some shows, such as *Set List: Stand-up without a Net*, are all about convincing well-established comedians to take the challenge of improvised stand-up.

Now, dealing with hecklers or doing crowd work means engaging in a dialogical process with the audience that can be quite unpredictable. In some cases, forcing improvisation on the performer can even make her engage in a pseudo-dialogical process with herself, for example,

by enacting a scene where she alternatively plays the parts of two characters (Robin Williams' improvised performance for *Set List* is a case in point, here). These moments afford many opportunities for the comedian to use much of the same dialogical and representational resources as the ones available in improv to elicit comic amusement – a typical combination of the mechanisms of superiority (laughing at the expense of someone in the audience), incongruity (building on an out-of-context reaction), and release (defusing the tension caused by aggressive hecklers). However, it should be noted that such interactions raise distinct ethical questions, because the power dynamics at play are fundamentally different than those which can be observed in an (ideally) egalitarian ensemble of improv performers.[12] On the contrary, in stand-up, the relationship between the performer and the audience members is fundamentally asymmetrical (the performer has a microphone, while the audience members do not; the performer is on stage, audience members are not; the performer is accustomed to public speaking, audience members are often not; etc.) and it is likely that this asymmetry interacts in a complex way with the comical resources afforded by the improvisational process.

Still, many funny moments of improvisation in stand-up (especially in improvised stand-up) do not rely on such (pseudo-)dialogical interactions, and instead simply follow stand-up's more conventional setting of telling stories in front of an audience and sharing thoughts with them. And yet, the audience seems to laugh even harder in these moments, just by knowing (or believing) that the performance is improvised. How could we explain this phenomenon? I suggest that the answer lies with the audience's phenomenological experience during improvised performances, rather than with the specifics of the improvisation creative process itself.

According to Brown (1996), improvised musical performances are characterized by their *presence*. To appreciate an improvisation is to apprehend the performance as being spontaneously created while it is being heard:

> The sense that a unique, unscripted, event is taking place as I listen gives an improvisatory performance a sense of moment. I have to be there at the right time to hear a specific improvisation: yet, I cannot plan to hear *that* one. Being there at the right time, I have a special sense of that music's birth, as I listen […]. The excitement the experience engenders is [thus] *enhanced*.
>
> *(365, my emphasis)*

Because of the unique and evanescent character of the performance, and because the audience and the performer share the same *inner time* during that performance, there is a specific excitement at play when we attend to improvisations, which acts as an *enhancer* of the performance's aesthetic properties. This means that something funny appears even funnier if we know that it is improvised, even though that is not enough to magically transform something unfunny into something funny – at best, it can make us more charitable towards the performer.

There is, however, one last argument that can be made in favor of a connection between improvisation and comic amusement. To attend an improvisatory event is also to apprehend a real-time thinking process. This has already been noted many times for the case of musical improvisation:

> From a listener's point of view, part of the attraction, I believe, is the sense that we are actually witnessing the shaping activity of the improviser. It is as if we in the audience gain privileged access to the performer's mind at the moment of creation.
>
> *(Alperson 2010: 274)*

This means that when we are attending an improvised performance, there is a twofold process at play. On the one hand, we are witnessing the product of the improviser's actions (be they sounds,

words, or gestures). But on the other hand, we are also attending the improvisation process itself, and, particularly when the improvisation is successful, enjoying the cleverness, imagination, and overall wit such a process requires. As Edgard Landgraf notes, "[T]he identification of wit with improvisation was common in Goethe's time" (Landraf 2011: 54). At its core, wit is a matter of discovering similarities between distinct things, and generating associations between concepts or ideas. As such, wit is closely related to humor, both because most humor relies precisely on such kind of ability[13] but also because there is something intrinsically uplifting, or even joyful, in seeing people displaying the swiftness and plasticity of their mind – just think of how we cannot help but smile when someone comes up with a clever argument in the context of an otherwise serious discussion (even though the light feeling of amusement provoked by such a display of cleverness can easily be trumped by other contextual factors). The kind of pleasure taken in following the performer's train of thought might interfere with the exploration of certain feelings, such as pity or fear, which require a high degree of absorption in the resulting performance itself. But, on the contrary, the detachment produced by such a twofold appreciation of improvised performances is an essential ingredient in seeing the humor in someone's speech and actions.

5 Conclusion

I have argued here in favor of a privileged connection between improvisation and comedy. In the first two sections, I showed how some of the core properties of improvisational creative processes provide performers with many comical resources that can then be more or less actively exploited to create funny situations, thus explaining why comedy is often easier to achieve through improvisational means than, say, tragedy; and in the third section, I showed how the phenomenological shift created among audience members who attend to an improvised performance is also an important factor in explaining the close relation that exists between improvisation and humor.

But an important question remains: can we establish a similar connection between improvisation and humor in other art forms, for example musical improvisation? The picture is probably less clear, here. Many performances of freely and collectively improvised music are certainly very funny, from John Zorn's relentless stylistic *collages* to the always-surprising endings of Mostly Other People Do The Killing's performances (listening to how the group bursts into laughter after the performance of "Baden" in their *Shamonkin!!!* album is a case in point). Many of the arguments given above for improv are also relevant for musical free improvisation: the cleverness of an improvised musical move will surely trigger a smile among the audience; and the unpredictability of the interactional dynamics will certainly afford the performers with many opportunities for surprising and humorous behaviors. But if there really is such a connection between musical improvisation and humor, it is definitely much weaker. The incongruity-related mechanisms that play such an important part in explaining the connection between verbal and representational cases of improvisation and comedy are indeed likely to be less powerful when it comes to non-verbal *and* non-representational cases. When listening to music, our very concepts of consistency and regularity are much less clearly defined and finely tuned than when we are attending to performances of improvised theater or improvised storytelling, which are supposed to have some sort of (even convoluted) connection with the external world, and which rely on natural languages that are sensitive to logical contradictions. But this does not necessarily mean that musical improvisation does not have some privileged connection with other domains of human expression or with specific sets of aesthetic properties. For example, Jerrold Levinson argued in favor of an expressive specificity of mainstream jazz improvisation in direction of "high-energy positive emotions" (Levinson 2015; but see Bertinetto 2019 for some concerns about this view); and more generally, many improvisers seem to think that musical improvisation – especially in its freer forms – is particularly apt at producing certain kinds of results (e.g., performances that

display organic-like transformation processes or complex and shifting timbral relationships; see the testimonies collected in Denzler and Guionnet 2020).

Describing improvisational artistic practices as "anything is possible" simply denies the specificity of their creative processes. In saying this, I do not mean to revive discourses that consider improvisation to be systematically inferior to its composed or scripted counterparts. On the contrary, I think we should endorse a pluralistic view on these matters, acknowledging that certain modes of production are more fit for achieving certain specific results. In that sense, while improvisation is perhaps not the easiest means to create a tragedy, it is probably the optimal way to achieve comedy: even more, as Keith Johnstone once wrote, "comedy is often *better* when improvised" (Johnstone 1999: 264, my emphasis). Improvisation is not a neutral creative process. It does things to the things it makes – not only because it can produce a phenomenological shift in the way the audience apprehends the performance, but, more importantly, because the specific constraints of the improvisational creative process *orient* the result in certain privileged directions.

Notes

1 Such 2017.
2 For a general overview of the role of improvisation in theatrical practices, see Frost and Yarrow 2016.
3 On the influence of long-form improv on TV comedy shows, see Fotis 2014: chapter 6.
4 On this topic, see Landgraf 2011: 42:

> [In the mid-18th century], as oral traditions are increasingly replaced by conventions and codes that rely on the practice of writing, improvisation, despite its long and venerable history in music, poetry, and theater, falls victim of the distinction between 'high' and 'low' art.

On the traditionally low assessment of comedy, see also Morreall 2014.
5 A clear sign of the ever-growing popularity of improv is the fact that Netflix decided to produce and broadcast in April 2020 three hour-long, long-form improv specials by the duo Middleditch & Schwartz. This is probably one of the first attempts to introduce long-form improv to such a massive audience, over and beyond more traditional, TV-friendly, sketch-based improv.
6 Lintott further argues for a conjoined account of humor, based on a combination of the three traditional theories of humor:

> All of the traditional theories humor – superiority, relief, and incongruity – are somewhat accurate and very interesting in their own right; some comic amusement is enjoying a certain kind of perceived incongruity that gives one a feeling of superiority reducing psychic and/or bodily energy via expression in laughter. Such a conjoined account explains a great deal about a great deal of comic amusement.
>
> (Lintott 2016: 356)

7 For an extensive ethnography of Chicago improv theater, see Sawyer 2003. In this book, Keith Sawyer also provides a valuable theoretical framework for the analysis of collaborative creativity and improvised verbal interactions.
8 In a scene observed during FIST 2017, two performers simultaneously offered a different name for their characters' dead dog: one of the performers explained that she "was still traumatized" as a way to account for this minor dissonance.
9 In a scene observed during FIST 2017, the performers were twenty-five minutes into the improvisation, and one had just made her first appearance, which is unusually late. When she was greeted with a, "You're, like, never around!," the audience laughed precisely because it was not clear whether her scene partner was talking to the character portrayed by the performer or to the performer herself.
10 See https://theatremomentum.com (accessed 10 April 2020).
11 "Silencing one's inner critic and shelving one's ego also sharply differentiates ensemble-based improv from stand-up comedy, where often the comic's ego and persona are the foundation for his or her act" (Fotis 2014: 8);

> Too often, improvisation is seen as something other than acting. The best improvisers are not stand-up comedians (which is not improvisation in the definition used by this study but a series of finely polished monologues performed with the audience serving as the scene partner), but actors

> who understand the importance of character work. Developing strong characters is the basis of good improvisation. What you *do* with those characters when you do not have a script is where the scene work comes into play.
>
> (Leep 2008: 167).

12 That does not mean either that performers have *de facto* an equal status when they are doing improv together. This tension between the egalitarian ideal of improv microcosms and the power dynamics at play in the rest of society is studied in great details by Amy E. Seham (2001: xviii):

> Chicago improv-comedy is dominated – both in numbers and in the control of content and style – by young, white, heterosexual men. Women and minorities are often marginalized by the mode of play on stage, through the manipulation of rules and structures, and by the rigid control of what improvisers acknowledge as *funny*.

13 This idea can be found in many writings on the aesthetics of humor from the late 18th and early 19th centuries. See for example William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Comic Writers of Great Britain*, "On Wit and Humour" (1819) or Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Asthetik*, §42 (1804). For an overview of the aesthetics of wit in England and France in the early 18th century, see Bicanová 2013. Note also that most improv classes or manuals routinely ask students to exercise their wit through free association games, and learning to go "from A to C," i.e., avoiding obvious connections but favoring ideas that are only indirectly connected to an audience's suggestion or a partner's offer, through an intermediate term or concept that should remain implicit.

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IMPROVISATION, MACHINES, CINEMA

Gilles Mouëllic

1 Introduction – An Historical Overview

The cumbersome technical constraints, the duration and complexity of a creative process that can span several months or even years, not to mention the sheer number of people involved in a variety of tasks ranging from scriptwriting to editing: on the face of it, everything seems to have conspired to keep cinema away from the improvisation usually associated with immediacy and spontaneity. Apart from the handful of analyses that acknowledged the improvisational facet of the actor's performance, cinema played little part in the multitude of twentieth century studies devoted to improvisational practices, most of which focused on other artistic disciplines, especially performing arts. Yet the primary vocation of cinema, to capture reality as it takes off, seems conducive to a reflection on its potential adaptability in unforeseen situations, which leads it to zoom right into this reality. With this in mind, it is essential to take into account the technical history of cinema: the improvisational skills of the film crew, and their reactivity, depend, after all, on the sound and image recording techniques themselves. The advent of digital technology has triggered a significant resurgence of interest in the history of these techniques, much of it targeting the media in general and cinema in particular, given the swift and spectacular turnaround it has engendered in the film production line as a whole. This is the field of study covered by the present chapter, which will attempt to interweave the history of techniques and the history of forms in cinema from the starting point of improvisation. While the hypotheses expounded stem from a general conception of post-Second World War cinema, they also draw on an analysis of several emblematic films crystallising the issues at stake. And yet again, the presence of music in most of the chosen works bears out the importance of the musical element in understanding the striking diversity of improvisational indicators.

In the first decades of the Cinematograph, its pioneers explored new forms of representation by putting the performance of these devices to the test. Shooting could prove to be an adventure in itself, as creative freedom found itself shackled by machines, making it necessary to improvise solutions in the face of unprecedented situations. The use of improvisation in cinema in those early days was, therefore, a way of adapting the imagination of the film crew to the capacities of the cameras but also of testing the limits of the machines on order to meet the creative aspirations of the cameramen. This experimental period marked the prelude of a complex intertwining of aesthetic ambition and technical innovation, studded with transformative episodes, including landmark events such as the arrival of the talkies and the introduction of colour. If one excludes certain devices used in amateur films and a few marginal practices, however, these innovations resulted in

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an increasingly complex armada of image- and sound-recording equipment. The film set gradually turned into a highly elaborate technical hub, requiring a considerable number of professionals to operate the imposing machines. In this regard, the photographs taken during 1930s Hollywood film shoots speak for themselves: cinema had come a long way since the Lumière operators first set up their cameras all over the globe.

Such technical complexity inevitably raised problems for filmmakers whose determination to portray reality found little echo in the studios of California or elsewhere. In both documentary film and a number of realist fictions, crews began competing in ingenuity in their efforts to convey the world in motion. It proved quite a challenge, however, to capture the instability of a situation or the spontaneity of a particular event with cameras weighing several hundred kilos, surrounded by a busy swarm of technicians, or with recording equipment that could only be provided by an on-site sound truck. It was only after the Second World War, or more precisely from the 1950s on, that this cinematic ambition gradually found the means to match its true expression, as significant technical innovations paved the way for a gradual improvement in the cameras' portability and performance and whittled down the amount of sound recording equipment. This "technical moment" is a pivotal element in the present reflection – and also marks the point at which the question of a cinema of improvisation was at its most salient. Two terms were used successively by protagonists and exponents to identify this moment: *cinéma-vérité*, coined by Edgar Morin in 1960, followed three years later by *direct cinema*, notably advocated by Mario Ruspoli and Richard Leacock, who saw the potential for intertwining the "direct" with lightweight technical equipment.[1] *Direct cinema*, the preferred option here, implies a form of immediacy in the recording, which this chapter aims to explore through the spectrum of improvisation. Although *direct cinema* and *improvised cinema* cannot cover exactly the same grounds of investigation, the interplay between the *direct* and *improvisation* is none the less a seminal tool in understanding the corpus targeted by this study.

Direct cinema remains associated with the documentary practices of the 1950s and 1960s in France, Canada and the United States. The ambiguity inspired by the concept is based on the premise that recording the "real" implies a lack of *mise en scène*. A cinematographic creation, however, is underpinned by the very notion of *mise en scène*, idealised above all in the "*cinéma d'auteur*" lauded by advocates of the French New Wave. If one discounts the term's unique significance within a defined period in the history of cinema, the notion of *direct* leads one to query the fragile frontiers between documentary and fiction, its posterity ensured as much by the films of Johan van der Keuken, Jean Rouch or Shirley Clarke as by those of Jacques Rivette, John Cassavetes or Nobuhiro Suwa, each of whom claimed in their own way a tendency towards improvisation (Mouëllic 2013). *Direct cinema* preceded by half a century the advent of digital media, another technical turning point and a crucial stage in this reflection. Although unprecedented improvised forms linked to digital technology can be identified, they do not constitute a "revolution", as is so often stated – they fit quite simply into a continuum of practices that the pioneers of *direct cinema* had already tried and tested fifty years earlier.

2 Filming Performance

After the Second World War, the first significant manifestations to grant improvisation a starring role revolved around the cinema's encounter with other artistic practices that had themselves opened up new horizons by shaking off formal constraints. Two films, the first devoted to painting and the second to music, can be considered both as expressions of the characteristic energies of film improvisation and as harbingers of *direct cinema*: in 1951, alongside producer Paul Falkenberg and composer Morton Feldman, Hans Namuth directed a short film entitled *Jackson Pollock 51*;

three years later, Robert Tilton chose the title *Jazz Dance* for his short, the heroes of which are a group of jazz musicians and dancers in a Harlem dance hall.[2]

Having already taken a series of black and white photographs of Pollock at work, Namuth decided in late 1950 to film the artist in the depths of the countryside, near the farmhouse in Springs (Long Island) he shared with his wife Lee Krasner. Pollock is first seen using a variety of tools to spread paint over a canvas placed directly on the floor. Namuth's idea for the second part of the film was to get the artist to paint on a sheet of glass, which he would film from underneath: the viewer could therefore see the forms being created in real time from the imprint of Pollock's gestures, whose eyes are riveted to the sheet. This film marked a turning point in the representation of the artist, for a variety of reasons that have been remarkably analysed in an article by Andreas Reckwitz (2017). This was the first time a film had shown with such density a painter in action, in full creative flow, without having to fall back on patently obvious simulations or overly explicit *mises en scène*. Namuth and Falkenberg were able to film the moment thanks to the gestural swiftness and performative aspect of Pollock's action painting. To Reckwitz, "Namuth's portrait also shows how the cultural meaning of art production is being fundamentally reconfigured […]. In drip-painting, the picture-making is reduced to the movement of the artist's body in space, randomly and automatically distributing paint over the canvas" (Reckwitz 2017: 59). "The film directs the viewer's attention away from the artist as an original genius in a state of rapture and towards the creative techniques and the material used" (*id*.). Namuth's film turned the creative process into an art in its own right:[3] it now became essential to focus not on the finished work but on the art in action, on the performance. With his 16 mm colour camera, Namuth filmed Pollock in the open air, with no additional light or limitations. His lightweight, flexible equipment enabled him to be at one with Pollock's gesturality and his seemingly spontaneous way of splattering colour. The painter's gesture is matched by the filmmaker's, in an improvised dialogue that gives a new slant on the representation of the creative act.

Jazz Dance, the short feature directed in 1954 by Robert Tilton,[4] marked a new stage in the figurative representation of the relationship between gesture and form in performance. While the soundtrack of *Jackson Pollock 51* is made up of Pollock's voice commenting retrospectively on the images, accompanied by Morton Feldman's musical composition, the concert given by a jazz band[5] at the Central Piazza Dance Hall in Harlem one evening in 1954 before an exuberant crowd of dancers was recorded live. Decades later, in a documentary entitled *Cinéma vérité, Defining the moment* (Peter Wintonick, 1999), cameraman Richard Leacock relived his enthusiastic reaction when Tilton asked him to give up conventional shooting practices:

> I'll never forget that night. I fell in love 20 times. I was standing on tables, jumping around on the floor, all over the place. But shooting, shooting, shooting. And it was freedom! Screw the tripods! Screw the dollies! Screw all the stuff! We can move!

Shooting without a script or precise brief, shooting with a small mobile projector, shooting with a hand-held camera, throwing off all spatial constraints, shooting without a clapperboard, throwing off all temporal constraints. To live the moment, to be part of the action. To record the "living spirit of jazz", as Tilton wrote in the opening text of the film. To find a cinematographic device that would not merely show the unique pulsation of jazz but vibrate with it: to improvise cinema and thereby experience the sensations of jazz improvisation itself.

Leacock, a lynchpin of *direct cinema*, recounts his physical involvement with the images he was shooting, each take being designed to retain a trace of the cameraman's presence within the event: "I think my obsession has been and is still the feeling of being there. Not of finding out this and analyzing this, of performing some virtual social act or something. Just what's it's

like to be there." For Leacock, evoking *direct cinema* takes him straight back to that experience in 1954, the evening he was given a free rein in filming the wild abandon of the musicians' and dancers' bodies. In the images of *Jazz Dance*, the impression of being in direct contact with the event being filmed stems from a twofold immersion that was to prove crucial in shaping these future cinematic forms. The first is immersion in space, which is relayed by the physical involvement of the cameraman with his hand-held camera, and the second is immersion through sound. The improvised shots, in their extraordinary mobility and innate energy, perceive the music through Leacock's own body, as the traces of his improvised gestures are carried by the rhythmical pulsation of the jazz. This memory of the body through images is linked to an equally decisive immersion through sound, brought about by innovations in sound recording. In the Harlem dance hall, Leacock becomes a dancer in his own right, encroaching not only into the domain of dance but into the music, and thereby contributing to the invention of revolutionary sound images that go way beyond the classic encounter of image and sound. The closing credits of *Jazz Dance* mention synchronisation experiments, probably between the reel-to-reel tape recorders of the American company Ampex,[6] which were admittedly cumbersome but portable, and Leacock's camera. Live, portable and synchronised sound was yet to come, as the sound and image recording devices here were still separate, but both were nevertheless recorded in one and the same place, on a single evening, and in technical conditions that, despite their vulnerability, finally provided an insight into the visual and aural density of the event.

3 Montage and Synchronism

The mastery of live synchronised sound, combined with lighter equipment, was invaluable in implementing the next stage in the development of improvised forms in the cinema. The first synchronised experiments between a mobile recorder and a 16 mm camera took place in the 1950s, with the advent of third-generation Nagra recorders in 1958. The Nagra 3 was optimised by transistor miniaturisation and battery power. The sound recordist could now carry the equipment over his shoulder, which left him free to carry a handheld or boom microphone. Synchronism occurred by means of a cable linking the tape recorder to the camera. Although the cable made the cameraman and sound recordist interdependent, it also brought about, for the first time, a combination of mobility and synchronism. Shooting could now take place with only a skeleton crew but with an unprecedented degree of reactivity. In a number of sequences shot during the Democratic campaign for the primaries in Wisconsin in 1960 (*Primary*, Robert Drew), the technicians were always just a few paces away from Robert F. Kennedy and Hubert H. Humphrey, following them from place to place, recording their gestures and words, insinuating themselves into their cars or falling into step with them as they made their way through the crowds. The American documentary filmmakers surrounding Robert Drew at Drew Associates[7] soon did their best to break away from the cable, in a bid to make the sound recordist and cameraman independent. In the early 1960s, the Maysles brothers, Albert on image and David on sound, were at the cutting edge of the latest electronic developments and honed a system based on the stability of quartz crystal oscillators. Two quartz watches enabled the camera and recorder to achieve perfect synchronisation but at a distance. The cameraman and sound engineer could now cover the same ground but totally independently.[8] In February 1964, the Maysles accompanied The Beatles on their first American tour to direct *What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA*,[9] the first feature film to be shot entirely with a hand-held camera and live synchronised wireless sound.

Several episodes in *What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA* show the adaptability of the Maysles, whose discreet presence became increasingly natural among the band's inner circle.

One sequence was shot during a vibrant evening at a club on 45th street in Manhattan. Albert and David Maysles recorded the crowd on the dance floor, melding the sound of the live music, girls' voices and the voice of Ringo Starr, the most extrovert member of the Fab Four. The vivacity that emerges from these images stems from the beat of the rhythm and blues and the way its repetitive rhythmical motif is underscored by the montage, the unity of the sequence being maintained by the continuity of the music, recorded live. The synchronism adds to the feeling of immersion, to the impression of immediacy that envelops the viewer, an impression accentuated by the performative aspect of the images: the performance of the dancers, the performance of the musicians and the performance of the image and sound recordists, whose participation in the collective movement in no way detracts from the quality and precision of the frame, which remains remarkably stable. A more detailed study of the shot sequence provides an insight into the way the montage has taken the synchronised sound recording into account in order to intensify the in-the-moment effect while moving away from it to optimise the rhythmical potential of the inserts. Indeed, when one takes a closer look, although only a few shots were actually sync, once edited their perceived impact on the viewer is considerable, their modest contribution being apparently sufficient to guarantee a temporal unity that is in fact partly artificial. Synchronism does not tie the editor to the actual length of the event, it allows him or her to release other energies by relying on the rhythm of the music and the gestures of the dancers, the key to a more malleable form of montage. The ability to record the sound and image in one place and at the same time brings about an interaction between the aural and visual matter that could be termed *organic*, at its most striking in the music and dance sequences. The live sound recording, whether synchronised or not, is a key element in this organicity, as both *Jazz Dance* and *What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA* show. It produces effects such as echoes and resonance, which allow the images to be placed in a coherent sound environment, however fragile the recording may be. The performance of hand-held tape recorders finally made it possible to render this complex sound environment, even in the challenging conditions of a club saturated with noise. The second factor relates to the continuity effect conveyed by the improvisational elements in the music, the gestures of the dancers and the mobility of the frame.

The relationship between continuity and discontinuity one finds in jazz, in which the musicians' melodic-rhythmical inspirations form a constant dialogue with the regular pulsation of swing, is also a determining factor in the montage. The emergence of unprecedented manifestations of this montage depends on the importance accorded to gestures, movements and the desire to convey certain expressivities of the body that the cinema had not yet succeeded in depicting with such spontaneity.

The succession of images was not guided by a constructive logic in which each shot was to become a new brick in a future architectural edifice but by a desire to convey this expressive diversity, the logical interplay between the fluidity of the rhythmical pulsation and the discontinuous succession of shots being generated by ductile exchanges. The only aim of the montage in this instance is to capture the vitality, the freedom of improvisation of the musicians and dancers and the hand-held movements of the cameramen-cum-dancers themselves. The choice of short, highly mobile shots of these bodies, their lack of balance accentuated by the cameraman's mobile frame, lends a particularly physical perception to the sequence, while the overall unity is underscored by the pulsation of the music itself. This could simply be seen as a trick linked to the process of montage but it is also possible to read into it an innovative attempt to get as close as possible to the interwoven performance of the musicians, dancers and cameraman in the club. The editor's task here involves using rhythmical elements with a view to reinventing improvisation so that the audience can participate in the physical and collective intensity so characteristic of jazz. Improvised cinema heralded a *physicality* of images and the onset of new figurative forms within the collective dimension of improvisation.

4 Cinema and Collective Improvisation

This awareness of the collective was essential to the formal renewal associated with *direct cinema*. It was also of seminal importance in inspiring a multitude of vox pops, all with a clear sociological or anthropological bias. The gesture of handing over the microphone to trigger a dialogue with a random passer-by in the street, a craftsman in his workshop or a farmer in his field came to epitomise a cinema that was attempting to reinvent itself by means of less inhibiting dialogical devices, once again making the most of the mobility offered by small units made up of a reduced number of technicians equipped with lightweight equipment.[10] Speech was not alone in being liberated by *direct cinema*, whose collective aspirations found other, equally significant, expressive outlets in films devoted to music. In *Jazz Dance*, Leacock filmed two collectives – the dancers' and the musicians' – his hunger for images heralding a report drawn up by UNESCO ten years later,[11] in which he wrote: "Our ideal, our dream, was to have x cameras, the quantity didn't matter, and the same number of sound systems, without any wires to connect them and everything perfectly in sync."[12] In 1967, two years after this report, he was to shoot another musical film that would offer him an opportunity to try out his dream set-up. In order to film what was hailed as the biggest gathering of young people ever witnessed, between 16th and 18th June 1967, in the Californian city of Monterey, Don Allen Pennebaker got together a team of leading American specialists of *direct cinema*, including Leacock and Albert Maysles, who set their sights on the huge field that was soon to be invaded by tens of thousands of fans. Their only brief was to follow their instinct and film, film, film. In *Monterey Pop* (D. A. Pennebaker, 1968), the film set-up, with cameramen carrying hand-held cameras and recording devices positioned directly on and around the stage, while their fellow-cameramen made their way through the audience, also features a collective body endlessly filming and recording, its permanent adaptability to events compounded by the reactivity of the cameramen and the array of viewing angles and shot scales. *Monterey Pop* illustrates a determination to adapt the means to the action and a conviction that the set-up will leave the imprint of an exceptional rapport with the world, encompassing the collective fervour of youth and finding its most perceptive expression in the burgeoning pop scene of the early 1960s.

The *Monterey Pop* experience was in line with *What's Happening! The Beatles in the USA* and *Don't Look Back* (1967), in which Pennebaker filmed Bob Dylan's 1965 UK tour, but it also fitted in with every other film in which a small crew with hand-held cameras and portable tape recorders registered unusual remarks or everyday gestures. "We are faced with a phenomenon that I can only compare to a small jazz band's familiarity with collective improvisation", wrote Mario Ruspoli in 1963 in the context of *direct cinema*. This new style of cooperation generated by a collective impetus did indeed look to jazz improvisation for inspiration, its forte being to listen and adapt to the creative spark of the other musicians, within a collective hierarchy that fluctuates according to the solo performance of each band member. This reactivity in real time, one of the tenets of the collective dimension of improvisation, also relies on the singular and often highly demonstrative relationship between the musicians' bodies and their instruments, a physical relationship that recurs in any music influenced by Black culture. This interdependence between body and instrument shares a certain affinity with the techniques adopted by cameramen when lightweight visual and audio recording equipment first came in, using their machines to zoom in on the tools or instruments, in the musical sense of the term. These machines, which were now dependent on the movements of their bodies and the dexterity of their hands, opened up new avenues of human involvement during the shoot, the crux of the creative process. With the portability of these new devices, the cinema entered a marginal, yet significant phase of its technical history, in the sense in which "technique positions the subject at the heart of the manufacturing process, whereas technology claims that production is independent from human subjectivity"

(Ingold 2010: 297). The freedom acquired in the relationship with machines highlighted the collective dimension of cinematographic creation. Cameramen, sound recordists and boom operators now needed to interact differently not only with their equipment but with each other, in collective montages of gestures and machines, for the most part improvised. In *direct cinema*, a number of technological innovations brought about new shooting techniques, in which the amount left for potential improvisation was of vital importance. This cinema coexisted with other practices that were far more dependent on the power of machines and the technique/technology divide helps explain some of the tensions that came to light with the advent of digital media and the increasing influence of machines, in the context of a cinema that had become increasingly dependent on the hegemony of computers. Special effects were not, however, the only cinematographic focus for digital technologies. In less visible but equally vibrant aspects of contemporary cinema, alternative ways of optimising these technologies have also emerged, in the continuum of the creative potentialities of collective improvisation.

5 From Direct to Digital

Among the films that encapsulated this new take on digitally-linked forms of improvisation was Laurent Cantet's 2008 *Entre les murs*, a prime example both in the apparent modesty of its brief and in the scale of its technical means. With a view to adapting François Bégaudeau's eponymous novel for the screen, Cantet launched a year-long drama workshop in a secondary school on the outskirts of Paris. Every Wednesday, a number of voluntary students attended the workshop, run by both the filmmaker and the author, who also played the lead role of French teacher. The script, based on the twists and turns of the original book, was a work-in-progress, written with Robin Campillo and performed by young actors in both predetermined and improvised situations, inspired by a passage of the book or a fragment of life in the classroom. The scenes were adapted to take into account the teenagers' different personalities and the evolution of the characters, whose self-confidence increased with each weekly workshop.

Entre les murs is therefore a fictional film, the result of a collective enterprise in which each and every scene needs to be appropriated by the whole ensemble of participants. This appropriation was designed to preserve an element of uncertainty during the shoot, which could either be entirely spontaneous or partially engineered. Cantet, along with Bégaudeau and Campillo, decided they would neither provide the students with a written document nor make them learn scripted dialogue, opting instead for the students' own lexical inventions. During the shoot, the automatisms acquired during the year-long workshop reappeared in very similar forms but with new methods of expression, triggering unexpected reactions from the other actors, who were allowed to intervene mid-shot. The choice of improvisation, which highlights the natural feel of the film, relies on a highly sophisticated technical set-up revolving around high-performance digital machines.

Cantet was determined to film the spontaneity of speech, to record the musicality that characterises teenage language and phrasing, to capture the energy and tension of *collective* speech, the words that burst forth with no prior warning, according to the reactions of just one of the twenty-four actors in the class. He, therefore, required an extremely flexible recording device that would make it possible both to see and hear the mobility of this speech. The set-up called on digital techniques that had improved the flexibility of both sound and image but also, in the case of sound, the quality and reliability of the end result. Three hand-held cameras filmed constantly, one trained on the teacher, one on the students who were supposed to intervene in the scene and one on the look-out for any unexpected interjections. The sounds were recorded on two multitrack digital recorders to ensure simultaneous recording of the HF microphones carried by the actors, the booms and the high-performance microphones located on the ceiling. The simultaneous

recording of the three cameras and sixteen audio tracks, tuned to the same timecode, ultimately totalled one hundred and forty hours of rushes for a two-hour film.

This set-up engendered a visceral alertness that persisted throughout the shoot, as described here by Cantet:

> The camera keeps moving because one of our self-imposed rules was to try not to lose anything. This comes across even more clearly in the sound […]. We were keen to avoid any presupposition that something was about to happen and yet be ready to make it resonate through the film. We needed to have that flexibility but we also needed to respect the scenes' rhythm for the sake of the actors, in other words to let them perform a twenty-three minute scene knowing that it would ultimately only last five minutes. But when they were caught up in a rhythm, in the reality of a situation, we felt it was better to acknowledge that continuity, at least in the first couple of takes. It was therefore a prerequisite that the camera should be able to move really quickly.
>
> *(Cantet and Campillo 2009)*

Here Cantet is reiterating the fact that it takes time not only to convey spontaneous speech but to nurture genuine improvisation. This method of shooting provided a new slant on the relationship between director and actors. The multi-camera set-up, together with the diversity of sound sources, enabled Cantet to break off in the middle of a take in response to a particular event or to take a sequence in a different direction without having to stop recording. This technical support stimulated the reactivity of all the participants, who could concentrate wholeheartedly on the present with only the performance in their line of vision. It was, therefore, never a case of conforming to pre-established choices stemming from a precise script but one of working together, using their unfailing collective commitment to reinvent each scene as it was being filmed, an exercise Cantet sums up with an apt aphorism: "In a way, the take becomes the draft of itself."[13] In other words, the aim was not to achieve predetermined hypothetical perfection but to invent the sequence collectively during the actual take.

This determination to avoid ritualising the director's input demystified the recording and released new energies stemming from the permanent exchange between film crew and actors, an exchange that introduced a form of enjoyment in performance that is apparent throughout the film. The technical means involved also resulted in a radicalisation of practices that had already been tried and tested by other improvisational directors. Still in the context of speech, this was the case, for instance, when shooting the sequences in the same order as the script so as to draw the actors into the actual dramaturgical timeframe. It was also the case when "directing from the inside" (Mouëllic 2013: chap. 6): Bégaudeau, in his role as teacher, who had been given an almost free hand, was able to intervene to an extent in the *mise en scène* during the shoot and potentially alter the direction of a sequence or pick up on an unexpected comment by one of the actors. Without informing the group, however, Cantet also asked some of the actors to interject in the wake of some remark or other, in order to trigger unforeseen reactions among their classmates. These different processes show to what extent improvisation in the cinema depends on striking the right balance between the ability to master a complex set-up, the stability of the trajectories and the introduction of moments of freedom.

A second example revealing the importance of digital techniques in the renewal of forms concerns filmmaker Abdelatif Kechiche, who after *La Vie d'Adèle* (2013), took his work one step further with *Mektoub my love, canto uno* (2018). The cutting-edge digital cameras and recorders released him even further from technical constraints and enabled him to recreate conditions on set that mirrored real life as closely as possible: little or no additional lighting, no equipment to move around, HF microphones only rather than booms, the constant presence of music in the

cafés and clubs, extremely lengthy takes rendered possible by digital cameras and a preference for totally inexperienced actors and for young technicians with little real experience of first features. The sequences involved a series of rarely interrupted takes lasting several minutes, each generating several hours of rushes. Although this approach to filming tended to resemble that of Cantet, Kechiche broke new ground in the montage, driven by his unflagging determination to retain the energy and freshness of the improvisation. The 750 hours of rushes for *La Vie d'Adèle* (2013) had already called upon five editors, who sometimes intervened one after the other on the same sequences. This collective aspect of editing proved indispensable once again when handling in a reasonable timespan the 900 hours of rushes produced by *Mektoub my love: canto uno*. There was, however, one notable difference: whereas the decision to involve several editors in *La Vie d'Adèle* was inevitable given the totally unexpected volume of rushes, the multiple interventions for *Mektoub my love* were planned ahead of time, the need to adapt to an unforeseen situation in the first film having been turned by Kechiche into a deliberate strategy in the second.

The all-female editing team, therefore, found itself faced with a mountain of material but lacking a script or any precise directives. The autonomy of each sequence, only brought to the fore during the actual shoot, enabled Kechiche to implement a method that had already proved its worth in a number of scenes of *La Vie d'Adèle*. To quote the editors themselves,[14] the "real teamwork" and "collective editing" applied here was due to the fact that each sequence was treated like a first feature in its own right and handled by several editors at the same time. It was up to each individual to invent a story, to adapt the rushes to their own perception and to discover the intentions and internal rhythm of the scene. According to their personal reaction, they could improvise a particular path, try out a direction and then abandon it, ask a colleague to follow up an idea before returning to it. All the editors involved evoked a laboratory and a research process lasting several months, with nothing ever set in stone. The final cut, made by Maria Giménez Cavallo and Nathanaëlle Gerbeaux, who both feature in the credits as "Chief Editor" despite their total lack of experience, also received input from across the board before Kechiche came up with a first version, which he then fine-tuned yet again.

Thanks to virtual technology and the revolutionary flexibility of the material, the montage process, in turn, began to take on the live quality that had been so successfully achieved during the shoot itself, by means of the lightweight manoeuvrability of the visual and recording equipment. To Kechiche, digital techniques represent a tool that integrates the montage into a creative process of which the live and the collective are the cornerstones. Choosing technicians with little experience, who had consequently not yet acquired the mechanisms that come with familiarity, was part of a method that aimed to delve into the "depths of matter," as Mekas wrote with regard to improvisation (2002: 37). One more step had been taken, following on no doubt from an age-old cinematic *leitmotiv* that involved getting under the actual skin of life. One more step towards what may be conceivably described, for want of a better term, as an "aesthetic of improvisation," one more step towards a cinema in which

> the various members of a group choose a theme which they then proceed to invent freely, according to the whims of each, relying on sheer improvisation, as well as a certain congeniality. The result is a "creation" that is at once *collective*, *simultaneous*, and *extemporaneous*, yet (at its best) perfectly *organic*

These are the words of Umberto Eco in *The Open Work* (1989: 109), comparing live television and a jam session.

The fluidity of the rapport between body and machine not only refreshed the interaction between cameraman and sound recordist, the filmers and the filmed, but also between the people

actually being filmed. The aim was no longer simply to document a *presence* within the world but to convey a *relationship* to that world by providing a new slant on the methods of interaction demonstrated by all the protagonists. The films devoted to the advent of pop music in the early 1960s can be regarded in several ways as experimental launch pads. They made it possible to film small, already established communities, composed of the musicians themselves and their retinue, by taking their sound and image into places that had seldom welcomed cameras, such as hotel suites and concert hall dressing-rooms, but also by accompanying the bands in the street, on trains or in cars – those symbols of both the post-war boom and the mobile nature of the cinema and the world. A new era of film*making* was opening up, which would segue into experiences linked to the possibilities of digital technology, sparking, in turn, other forms of inventiveness and other forms of virtuosity. As Yves Citton put it, picking up on an idea initially developed by Tim Ingold,

> the virtuosic gesture, far from applying a program to a situation, is characterized by its ability to *improvise*, to reconfigure itself in order to stay as close as possible to whatever it perceives in a given situation. […] An approach of this kind forces us to acknowledge once again the inherent contradiction in the notion of mastery when applied to gesture: genuine mastery entails turning one's back on programmed mastery and can only come into its own if it is willing to alienate itself within a specific situation and with the specific material, randomness and peculiarities that may cross its path.
>
> *(Citton 2012: 43–4)*

Light, synchronous cinema stemming from the unprecedented flexibility of interwoven bodies, gestures and machines paved the way for improvisation by adapting itself to the most unlikely scenarios. In his essay entitled *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, Ingold defines anthropology as a knowledge that is not "to be reconstructed on the outside, as an edifice built up 'after the fact'", but as something "inhering in skills of perception and capacities of judgment that develop in the course of direct, practical and sensuous engagements with our surroundings" (Ingold 2013: 18). The anthropologist then focuses on artistic practices to defend "the way of the craftsman […] to allow knowledge to be grown from the crucible of our practical and observational engagements with the beings and things around us" (Ingold 2013: 6). This defence of the artist's commitment to the matter of the world as a way of perceiving its complexity is a way of viewing knowledge as a tangible correspondence between the person manipulating the matter and the matter itself. Although Ingold does not refer directly to the cinema, his hypotheses enable us to understand how the concepts of live and improvisation stem from a desire to follow "the movement of life itself, in order to uncover the paths it treads" (Descola and Ingold 2014: 72).

Faith in the improvisational aspect of the cinema forms part of a societal trend that spills beyond cinema itself and needs to be understood through the spectrum of sociology, anthropology or the history of Man's relationship with the machine. "The true culmination of the machine, the point at which it raises the degree of technicity, does not in fact correspond to an increased automatism but on the contrary to an underlying margin of indeterminacy in its mode of operation. It is this margin that allows the machine to be attuned to outside information" – wrote Gilbert Simondon back in 1958 (2012: 12), just as the invention of new equipment was giving filmmakers an opportunity to increase the margin of indeterminacy during filming and, little by little, reverse their relationship with the machine. The movements on set were no longer reliant on the machines' performance, the camera dollies or the predetermined itineraries imposed by the lighting. It was now up to the machine to adapt to the unconstrained movements of people and

objects within an open space. Thanks to more mobile equipment and long-distance synchronisation, Man reinvented his relationship with image and sound recording machines by bringing the devices closer to the human body. This brought about a colossal shift in his inter-actions with his surroundings and introduced, to continue the musical metaphor, new channels of communication with a polyphonic and polyrhythmic world in motion. The collective experience encapsulated by *Entre les murs* and *Mektoub my love: canto uno*, two "digital films", perpetuates and reinvents a desire for a cinema that harks back to *direct cinema*. As long as Man remains, even marginally, "a living interpreter between one machine and another", to quote Simondon (2012: 12), an element of indeterminacy and subjectivity will continue to prevail as a force of resistance. Alongside cinematographic practices caught up in a technological marathon that has weakened the frontiers between Man and machine, improvised cinema still perpetuates the idea of cinema as a key for understanding human beings by virtue of its unshakeable belief in the power of a gesture, a word or a look.

(Translated from the French by Caroline Taylor-Bouché)

Notes

1 Séverine Graff (2011) has consummately highlighted the adventures of this dual notion.
2 Both these films are available on YouTube.
3 It seems likely that it was this film that led American critic Harold Rosenberg in 1952 to coin the term "action painting" to describe Pollock's art, thereby defining a specific trend in Abstract Expressionism.
4 This twenty-minute film is little-known and seldom cited, other than by Siegfried Kracauer, who describes it as "an astute compilation of snapshots that plunge us into the collective ecstasy of jazz fans" (Kracauer 2010: 83).
5 The band was made up of Jimmy McPartland (trumpet), Jimmy Archey (trombone), Pee Wee Russell (clarinet), Willie "The Lion" Smith (piano), Pops Foster (double bass) and George Wettling (drums), improvising on *Jazz Me Blues* (Tom Delaney), *Ballin' the Jack* (Jim Burris and Chris Smith), *Royal Garden Blues* (Clarence Williams and Spencer Williams) and *The Saints* (trad.).
6 The principle of magnetic tape had been secretly invented by the Germans in the 1930s and was honed after the Second World War by the American firm Ampex, established in 1944. It was these early models of reel-to-reel tape recorders launched by Ampex that led guitarist Lester William Polsfuss, aka Les Paul, to experiment with multi-track recordings for the first time.
7 Including Richard Leacock, Albert and David Maysles, D. A. Pennebaker and Terence Macartney Filgate, all key players in the *direct cinema* movement.
8 It took a whole decade to stabilise the system invented by the Maysles onto readily available devices. The French company Aaton played a crucial role in establishing live synchronous sound.
9 The film was re-edited in 1993 by Apple, under the title *The Beatles: The First U.S. Visit*. This is the only version currently available.
10 One could mention, among the most famous of these films, *Chronique d'un été* (Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, 1961), *Les Inconnus de la terre* (Mario Ruspoli, 1961), *Le Joli Mai* (Chris Marker and Pierre Lhomme, 1963) and *Pour la suite du monde* (Pierre Perrault, Michel Brault, Marcel Carrière, 1963).
11 "As *cinéma-vérité* declined, UNESCO launched a vast programme of research into lightweight cameras, with the aim of promoting film production in the developing countries. The institution set up a number of exchanges and financed the first studies into these new devices but Enrico Fulchignoni, who headed the project, only voiced the opinions of well-known personalities such as Ruspoli, Leacock, Schaeffer or Marcorelles, all of whom advocated a technicist approach. The non-exhaustive research that stemmed from this programme was therefore biased towards lightweight equipment, favoured American and Canadian filmmakers as opposed to French, and rejected any discursive aspect. The first work of reference, *L'Aventure du cinéma direct* by Gilles Marsolais, was compiled in France in the late 1960s and melded perfectly with UNESCO's line of research (Fulchignoni even wrote the foreword)" (Graff 2014 : 25).
12 Richard Leacock, « Naissance de la "Living camera", UNESCO report, 30 June 1965.
13 Unpublished interview conducted by the author on 13 June 2013 in Paris.
14 Diatkine 2018.

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39

IMPROVISATION AND POETRY

Rob Wallace

> In fact poetry will not sing jazz through constricted mouth of an anteater
>
> — *Jayne Cortez, from "Poetry"*

> "[…] to improvise means to not concern ourselves with quantity and form but rather to take up a strange poetry."
>
> — *Lê Quan Ninh, from Improvising Freely: The ABCs of an Experience*

> A poem can be made of anything.
>
> — *William Carlos Williams, from Kora in Hell: Improvisations*

Improvisation *and* poetry… improvisation *in* poetry – two related but potentially different directions of inquiry. What counts as improvisation? What counts as poetry? Until the late 20th century, critical discourse detailing the connections between improvisation and poetry was relatively scant (with notable exceptions outside of English-language commentary), despite the fact that poets have most likely improvised since humans began to create poetry. This chapter provides a brief introduction to some of the key debates surrounding improvisation in the context of poetry, and offers some theoretical perspectives to guide further consideration of the historical and contemporary practice of improvisation in/and poetry. A comprehensive accounting of these globe-and history-spanning activities would be impossible in a short chapter; thus, I have opted to survey some of what I believe to be the central theoretical concepts from which to approach the study and appreciation of (and, I would add, the *making of*) improvisation/poetry.

1 Re: Definitions

While improvisation has been practiced – and in some cases, theorized – for millennia, I mark the development of the Jazz Study Group in 1995 (now The Center for Jazz Studies) at Columbia University, and the Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice (ICASP) initiative in 2007 (now the International Institute for Critical Studies in Improvisation, or IICSI), based out of the University of Guelph, as important beginnings of explicit research about the nature and complexity of improvisation in a variety of different fields (including, but not limited to, artistic practice). In addition to several other symposia, conferences, and contemporaneous research initiatives, these two origin points provide the basis for an interdisciplinary field of inquiry now called

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Critical Improvisation Studies. While this context of scholarly inquiry is based primarily out of North America, it has formed crucial global connections that make its development even more notable, shaping international research initiatives such as the present volume. Despite this record of at least twenty-five years of research, one of the lingering problems with discussions of improvisation, particularly in interdisciplinary contexts, is defining what, exactly, improvisation is.

In the *Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies*, George Lewis and Benjamin Piekut note three "master tropes" from the historiography of improvisation studies, common to how improvisation has (or has not) been defined. These tropes can be succinctly labeled as "masking," "neglect," and "binary opposition" (Lewis and Piekut 2016b: 4). "Masking" connotes critics who have resisted using the term "improvisation" to discuss processes that would nevertheless seem to warrant the word. The trope of "neglect" indicates a lack of – and, in some cases, an outright antipathy towards – discussion of improvisation, even in arenas where such a discussion might be appropriate. "Binary opposition" is the trope that posits an essentialist contrast between composition (usually representing "planning" or "fixity" or "product") and improvisation (usually representing "lack of planning" or "spontaneity" or "process"). To these three I add a fourth trope that may well now be in circulation: the apologia. Or, perhaps an even better name: the "give-me-a-break!" In other words: even though there is a significant body of scholarship stating that improvisation is a complex activity that can be defined in many ways, the commonsensical version of improvisation (sometimes represented by any combination of the aforementioned three master tropes) still has to be counteracted in scholarly introductions to the topic. With the intention of clearing the air – but perhaps, in the process, inadvertently making it smokier – I offer my own definition of improvisation: "In its most *basic* form, improvisation involves the reshuffling, revising, and re-creation of information, using pre-existing materials to make something new" (Wallace 2010: 7).

Admittedly, such a capacious definition of improvisation risks critical skepticism, since it "lets in too much" and potentially dilutes the critical object. As Bruno Nettl remarked in an important history of critical inquiry into musical improvisation: "I once began an essay about improvisation with the sentence, 'We probably shouldn't have begun calling it that'" (Nettl 2016: 169). The wealth of practices that can be potentially defined as improvisation (and, for that matter, as poetry) are so disparate as to appear very different, depending on what we are looking at. On the other hand, too limited an approach forces us to amass an overwhelming list of exceptions to the rule that threaten to create a whole new set of definitions. Perhaps this is why many essays, such as the one you are now reading, begin with this same kind of caveat. It's hard to define improvisation!

As I have argued elsewhere (Wallace 2010), I want to stress that improvisation in any domain is a practice for doing or making or being – it does not *necessarily* entail any single ethical or moral framework. Improvisation can be "good" or "bad" only insofar as we understand what it means to improvise in a particular context, in a particular place, time, and medium. Nevertheless, in Euro-American contexts, improvisation for much the 18th century onwards has been viewed quite negatively at worst (the trope of "neglect"), and suspiciously at best (the trope of "masking" and sometimes of "binary opposition") – despite the fact that, as Edgar Landgraf and Angela Esterhammer have argued in different ways, our modern conception of art is undergirded by an understanding of improvisation as the means to achieving authenticity, originality, and even beauty in art and life (Esterhammer 2008 and 2016; Landgraf 2011). Lingering misunderstandings of improvisation have much to do with largely unexamined assumptions about the value of literacy, textual fixity, and logic – categories that are frequently associated with a commonsensical notion of poetry as a printed product of high-art culture (and with the corollary values associated with the groups who hold control over such high-art culture) (Foley 2002).

But if the definition of improvisation poses problems, so too does the definition of poetry. Defining poetry, like defining improvisation, offers clues to how a critic views the social practice and

potential social value of poetry. Whether improvised or not, is poetry merely "verse," structured by meter, rhyme, and other formal qualities that can be analyzed according to systems of genre? Or is poetry a "feeling" or "mood" or "emotion" that words in a particular order can evoke? Or is poetry anything that's not prose (leaving aside the question of "poetic" prose and prose poetry)? Does poetry have to be autonomous as language – that is, without recourse to music, visual art (beyond the possible use of scripts or alphabets), etc.? Or can poetry be found in other forms? All these definitions (and maybe all of them at once) could be said to be more or less accurate descriptions of some – but not all – artifacts we might call "poetry." Poetry's definition, like poetry itself, is almost necessarily improvised out of the context surrounding the thing or event labeled "poem."

Despite a lack of consensus about the definition of poetry, most scholars agree that something like poetry has existed since before the invention of written language: oral poetry. As John Miles Foley, one of the luminary scholars of oral poetry, has noted,

> It's simply impossible to overstate the importance of oral poetry across the disciplinary spectrum, primarily because on available evidence it appears to be a universal human experience. Because oral poetry dwarfs written literature in size and variety, it should be everyone's concern.
>
> *(2002: xii)*

Foley also argues that

> oral poetry is a highly diverse category of verbal art, much larger and more varied than written poetry. Of course, written poetry itself hardly ranks as an orderly collection of cookie-cutter items. […] The dimensions of language, literary tradition, genre, prosody, and numerous other features preclude a too-unified idea of poetry, even within verbal art limited solely to the page.
>
> *(2002: 127)*

Foley's argument seeks to expand and enrich our cultural understanding through a more generous experience of poetry. But it is also a historical argument grounded in a range of anthropological and archaeological data not available to pre-20th century commentators. So whether or not we privilege written forms of poetry, Foley's point is that poetry as a form of *oral* expression has existed for much longer than written poetry and, therefore, is profoundly important for understanding the role of verbal expression broadly conceived (despite an often still deeply ingrained – but much more recent – bias towards print, especially in so-called Western cultures). Moreover, Foley's work emphasizes the ongoing ubiquity of oral poetry and the complex ways it continues to interface with print culture, rather than relegating oral practices to a primitive past now superseded by written technology. As we will see, any discussion of poetry and improvisation necessitates an understanding of the important legacy and contemporary practice of oral poetry.

Opening up improvisation to my provisional but relatively simple (though not simplistic) definition not only allows us to discuss a more compelling variety of processes and artists, but also allows a more ethical and just framework from which to think about improvisation in/and *poetry*. Despite important contextual differences, we can learn something significant about our shared humanity precisely by analyzing diversity in practice. As Foley notes, "[O]ral poetry is an ecology of genres, a verbal ecosystem" – and an ecological perspective is not only more interesting but also healthier (2002: 144). Such an ecological model is also reminiscent of Randy Fertel's assertion that improvisatory texts themselves (including poetry, fiction, etc.) form a kind of "meta-genre," where a "topos of spontaneity," along with thematic and other similarities, govern a variety of otherwise very disparate creations (see Fertel 2015).

Improvisation and poetry have always been closely connected. These connections are made clearer, however, if we can agree on a basic definition of poetry and of improvisation that allows access to a wide range of activities. Viewing improvisation as strictly "spontaneous, unscripted, unplanned," or in terms of other stereotypically narrow definitions will leave much improvisation in poetry unseen and unheard. On the other hand, if we only consider as poetry scripted, printed texts adhering to conventional metrical and formal patterns (even so-called free verse), then we will miss a world of poetry that is interesting and compelling often because it so closely aligns with improvisatory practices.

Poetry, then, is a wide-open category contingent on specific cultural meanings and contexts, which, nevertheless, often involves improvisatory practices (largely, but not solely, due to its long-standing status as a performative, oral art form). It is – like instrumental music, theater, dance, or any other performing art – one of the richest spaces for understanding the value and practice of improvisation broadly defined. With some exceptions (such as the more abstract varieties of sound poetry and concrete or visual poetry), poetry usually involves language, and can, thus, tell us a great deal about how humans build worlds with words via improvisation. As with one of the most basic forms of interpersonal communication – conversation – poetry often involves language at the cusp of new meanings, new ideas, or ritualized interaction that go beyond words into some other function. Sometimes closer to sound or vision, sometimes closer to print or speech, but often retaining a kind of liminal quality, poetic language is *poetry* because it seems to do something different than "everyday" language – even when it is, as many modernist poets wanted us to believe, drawing precisely on the everyday to enable us to see the strangeness and artistic (poetic) qualities of everyday language itself.

2 "Improvisors of Tales?" Oral Poetry and Improvisation

A watershed moment in the study of improvisation and poetry ironically premiered with a curious deployment of the "binary opposition" trope, contrasting improvisation unfavorably with composition. In 1960, Albert Lord published the results of many decades of research, spearheaded by his mentor, Milman Parry, in a book titled *The Singer of Tales*. Parry had been vexed by the continuing debates about whether Homer, the purported "author" of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and thus the "father" of Western literature, stood at the end of a line of oral poets as a consolidating, final compiler-author, or if he instead created his poetry orally in performance. Parry and Lord, along with their South Slavic assistants such as Nikola Vujnović, engaged in a novel form of comparative research, locating a living tradition of so-called "epic," Homeric-style, oral poetry among Serbian *guslari* ("player of the *gusle*," the small bowed fiddle that the poets accompany themselves on). Using an almost mathematical system to break down primarily the linguistic but also the musical material from a variety of interrelated epics, performed by a number of different singers, Parry and Lord developed a theory that, despite its flaws, remains a powerful way to understand the process of creating poetry in performance. It is known as the Oral-Formulaic theory, sometimes called the Parry-Lord Theory, even though Parry died before seeing Lord assemble and publish their research.

At the heart of this theory was the idea that South Slavic singers were able to spontaneously create extremely long poems – hundreds and even thousands of lines of verse, sometimes taking hours to perform – through a complex mastery of interlocking "formulae" (sometimes consisting of short phrases, sometimes longer set pieces or descriptions, as in the famous Homeric epithets like "wine-dark sea"). Along with the rhythmic and melodic features of the musical accompaniment and the relatively standard but elastic decasyllabic verse structure, the *guslari* were creating – in the 20th century – what Parry and Lord considered an analogue to the Homeric epics. Having proved that living humans could create such a complex verbal and musical structure through oral

performance, Lord then applied the theory to historical oral poetry, including the Homeric epics, *Beowulf*, and the *Song of Roland*. The conclusion seemed almost indisputable: the origins of much of the canon of Western literature was based in oral poetry, and not written language. Homer, who or whatever else he represented, was like the modern *guslari* – a *singer*, not *writer*, of tales.

For contemporary readers accustomed to the complexities of improvisation, illuminated by scholarship in music, theater, etc., the oral-formulaic process that Lord describes seems to be a common definition of improvisation. Accretional, "lick"-based playing has been a part of many music-based improvisational traditions, for example, where material is spontaneously recombined. The master improviser internalizes formulae to such a high degree of virtuosity that her creations seem to be new, even though the basic material (pitches, rhythmic phrases, scales, etc.) is common to all other performers. Yet Lord very quickly discourages readers from labeling the art of the *guslari* (and, therefore, the art of Homer) "improvisation." Instead, Lord insisted for his entire career that this process was more accurately described as "oral composition":

> If we equate [oral composition] with improvisation in a broad sense, we are again in error. Improvisation is not a bad term for the process, but it too must be modified by the restrictions of the particular style. The exact way in which oral composition differs from free improvisation will, I hope, emerge from the following chapters. […] With oral poetry we are dealing with a particular and distinctive process in which oral learning, oral composition, and oral transmission almost merge; they seem to be different facets of the same process.
>
> *(Lord 1960: 5)*

In a 1991 preface to a compilation of essays on oral poetry, *Epic Singers and Oral Tradition*, Lord again asserts,

> I stoutly defend the legitimacy of the term 'oral literature,' and I also emphasize that the method of composition of oral-traditional narrative is not 'improvisation' but a special form of 'composition in performance' that uses units called 'formulas' and themes […] [and] 'blocks of lines'.
>
> *(Lord 1991: 2)*

What seems to inform Lord's perspective is the idea that improvisation, in his view, means that a performer is "merely" creating off the top of his head, rather than basing his spontaneous art on a *tradition* – note his use of the term "free improvisation" in the passage above from *The Singer of Tales*. Interestingly, in 1960, debates about jazz improvisation were also hardening around a conservative view that "true" jazz must stem from an organized tradition, whereas "free jazz" was chaotic noise. There is no evidence that Lord was referring to this sense of "free improvisation" (the term would not be widely used in connection to improvised music until later on in the 1960s), but the similarity in the context here is striking.

For Lord, "composition" made sense for the nevertheless highly improvisatory practice of oral poetry, since "composing" supposedly indicated a more measured, careful, and, indeed, "formulaic" ability to create structure. Lord also seemed unable to conceive of improvisation as a viable procedure for creations of extremely long duration; the preference for "epic" (as opposed to other, often "shorter" genres of poetry) demonstrates a blind spot in Lord's research, but also represents a common contemporaneous bias against cultural formations considered to be novel and "popular" versus traditional or classical. "Composing" is, thus, the province of a serious, sustained tradition, rather than a spontaneous, fleeting moment of playful improvisation. However, from a contemporary perspective, we know that there is probably never any truly "free" improvisation, even as there can be no truly "fixed" composition (see Lewis and Piekut 2016a for

various approaches to the "binary opposition" trope). Master improvisers in many different fields are highly skilled at constructing new material out of old traditions. But because of Lord's bias, the *guslari* "singers-of-tales" (and Homer, et. al.) are now, ironically, some of the most famous improvisers-who-are-not-improvisers (for a more contemporary reconsideration of the Oral-Formulaic Theory in the context of jazz improvisation, see Foster 2004).

Much more can and has been said about the brilliant and problematic aspects of the Oral-Formulaic Theory. But even before Parry and Lord established their groundbreaking work on the origins of Western literary tradition, arguments over the value of improvisation in relation to Homer had contributed to the cultural context that would influence Lord's decision to advocate for "composition" over "improvisation." Romantic debates surrounding the Ancient Greek *rhapsodes*, or performers who improvised poetry in the manner that Lord and Parry would later uncover in Yugoslavia, had centered around ethics as much as poetic technique. As Angela Esterhammer points out, "What is at stake is whether the traditional role of the Homeric rhapsode in drawing a community together at public festivals and reaffirming values in a moment of shared enthusiasm can be recovered in a modern context" (2016: 50). Esterhammer argues that the appeal of improvisation for Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge was sometimes accommodated as a *private* variety of "inspiration" – a primarily aesthetic-based process of creating what would become an eventually fixed/edited and printed text – whereas performing improvised wordplay in *public* could be potentially dangerous (Esterhammer 2016: 51). As Edgar Landgraf notes in his discussion of Heinrich Von Kleist's "On the Gradual Production of Thoughts While Speaking," if the Comte de Mirabeau could launch the French Revolution via an improvised speech, then the connection between improvising with language and improvising with *politics* might be a radical act (Landgraf 2011: 115–26). Improvisation – especially with language – has, thus, historically been viewed ambivalently. Landgraf's ideas, as described in more detail below, can also potentially offer a different take on the "inspiration" of a poet like Coleridge.

3 Time, Performance, and the "Authenticity" of Poetic Improvisation

There are several important and interconnected theoretical considerations that deserve further attention, already embedded in this discussion of oral poetry. Perhaps the most significant issue is the relationship between improvisation, time, and performance. Since poetry exists on a continuum between oral and print cultures, the question of whether a supposedly "fixed" or printed text can be "actually" improvised, in contrast to an orally created poem, presents a potential obstacle for our analysis of improvisation/poetry.

As Edgar Landgraf and Randy Fertel argue in their respective pieces in this volume and elsewhere (Landgraf 2011 and Fertel 2015), improvisation is often evaluated in relation to its temporal context. Such a temporal context might be tentatively defined as a "performance," the setting that so intrigued Lord and Parry (see Foley 2002 for more on oral poetry and performance). Even my provisional definition of improvisation implies a relationship to time in the sense that improvisation "makes something new." Novelty and spontaneity are often considered natural features of improvisatory practices, even if that novelty can be traced to the recombination of previous ideas, words, movements, colors, *formulae*.

Nevertheless, taking one's time, carefully considering, and planning a *product* remain privileged activities in contemporary society. Improvisation is often thought of as a "process" that contrasts unfavorably with such "rational" or "composed" modes of labor (again, the "binary opposition" trope). Yet a more complex analysis of improvisation and time reveals problems with the binary distinction between planning and spontaneity, process and product. Whether we're approaching it from the perspective of physics, phenomenology, or funk, time is elusive. There is no singular concept of time from which to address a singular concept of improvisation or spontaneity.

Furthermore, the distinction between a "performance" in time as opposed to "living" in time has been under question, as Landgraf argues, since at least the 18th century (Landgraf 2011). If the nature of time and performance are relative, then it becomes increasingly difficult to determine what and when someone is "actually" improvising. A more useful analytical perspective, then, might be to ask: what do we gain from believing that something is improvised? Or, to refine this idea even further using a thought experiment from visual art history: does it matter if we cannot tell if an improvisation is "fake" or not?

In his exploration of German Romantic aesthetics, Landgraf has usefully argued that improvisation can be thought of as both a "staged" and an "installed" practice (Landgraf 2011; see Landgraf's chapter in this volume for an analysis of "installed" improvisation in the work of Erwin Redl). Landgraf details how German Romantic theater presented an almost post-modern, self-reflexive staging of improvisation where the fourth wall was broken and the audience was brought into the performance. This blurring of boundaries led to a blurring of what was "real" and what was "theater," with the corollary notion that life and the theater were two sides of the same coin – or, rather, one continuum of improvisatory activity. Landgraf notes that this aesthetic gesture was meant not only as a playful, ironic device but also as a means of educating the audience: improvisation as an "art" (i.e., as a part of theater, poetry, fiction), but also as a technique, as in "the art of living gracefully." "Staged" improvisation, then, is not just a convention of meta-theater in German Romanticism, but a powerful tool for interpreting our own modern sense of creativity and ethics – an ethics *of* creativity. Even if the "staging" of improvisation has been elaborately planned, pre-composed, or memorized, the idea of improvisation becomes both an emblem of authentic art, and an emblematic practice that teaches us to be modern.

Landgraf's argument shifts our notion of the geographical and historical locations of improvisation in terms of modernity – often associated with the cultural transformations in the Western hemisphere due to the trans-Atlantic slave trade, or the even greater influx of Afro-diasporic improvisatory practices of the early-20th century, such as jazz. Locating a new aesthetic of improvisation that is also concerned with an ethical and pedagogical stance in late 18th-century Germany implies a somewhat different take on Paul Gilroy's influential concept of a "counterculture of modernity," wrought from the improvisatory initiatives of Afro-diasporic peoples (Gilroy 1993). Landgraf's argument indicates that improvisation, whether from Euro- or Afro-centric perspectives, is the driving force of what it means to be modern, in all of its paradoxes and contradictions. Functioning somewhat like a return of the repressed in Western culture, improvisation becomes a Romantic model for revolution just at the moment when those democratic revolutions supposedly inspired *by* Romanticism were denying democracy to a wide swath of the public (women, people of color, et. al.). The "counterculture of modernity" is thus both a development from, and a response to, the call of Romantic improvisation. Unlike the formulae of the ancient "singers-of-tales," then, improvisation in the modern sense privileges individual agency and difference over tradition (which is precisely why Lord and other commentators remained suspicious of improvisation).

In an example that may be more familiar to English-speaking readers, we can see how these ideas about Romanticism, broadly conceived, have transformed modernity via poetry. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's famous introduction to "Kubla Khan" details his opium-inspired dream wherein he composed a lengthy poem, only to be interrupted upon awaking from transcribing the complete text, resulting in the final "fragment" of the published poem. But this is not only a clever device to structure the metanarrative of the poem; it is also a *staging* of Coleridge as a representative modern thinker, a person who can create something solid from the ephemeral cloud of dreams amid the quotidian distractions of an afternoon … even though Coleridge crafted the poem over a larger temporal frame and under different circumstances than the

introduction admits to (for Fertel's reading of this poem in an improvisational context, see Fertel 2015: 106–11).

We can push this analysis even further back in European history to consider the traditional paragon of English poetry and drama, William Shakespeare. Despite the ubiquity of published versions of Shakespeare's works, as well as an entire critical industry surrounding their interpretation, we have no holograph manuscript of any of Shakespeare's own plays or poetry. Therefore, the presumption that "we are reading Shakespeare" becomes complicated not just by the still hotly and sometimes ridiculously debated issues of Shakespeare's identity but also by the lack of an authoritative text from which to interpret – not unlike the problems faced by scholars of Homer trying to determine what the improvisational/oral versus textual content of the epics might be. In other words, does Shakespeare's drama "authentically" exist in the printed versions of the plays, or in their oral performance? Does the First Folio offer the most reliable version of the texts, being closest in time to the Bard's "intentions?" How, ultimately, do we ever know an author's intentions, anyway? Despite the history of post-structuralist literary studies that have provided a rich set of answers to these questions, our public infatuation with a one-to-one, causal relationship between printed text and authorial intention is stubbornly engrained. But if we don't know (a) precisely how Shakespeare actually composed (or improvised!) his works or (b) what the "original" scripted version of his texts – as approved by the author – might have been, then it seems our best recourse for understanding "Shakespeare" is a mixture of various techniques and approaches. And an *improvisational* approach, both in terms of performance and reception, would contribute to the contemporary relevance of such a "Voiced Text," as Foley dubs oral poetry that is written down but intended for performance (Foley 2002: 43–5).

A healthy respect for the tradition and an ability to improvise within and against that tradition animates any compelling "reading" of Shakespeare – and perhaps this is the inspiration behind the early 21st-century Canadian television program *Slings and Arrows*. In one early scene, downcast Shakespearean actor Geoffrey Tennant (played by "real-life" Shakespearean actor, Paul Gross), faced with personal and professional roadblocks, is asked to teach Shakespeare to a group of business management peons. Seeing the absurdity of his charge, Tennant decides to just "fuck around with some texts" ("Madness in Great Ones").[1] Later, we see how the business lackeys have actually been drawn into an unexpectedly moving performance of *Macbeth*. In this remarkable scene we are witnessing a televisual example of the 18th-century "staged improvisation" that Landgraf marks as particularly modern: an actor in a television show about actors, acting like he is not acting, while teaching supposed non-actors about acting, who then act out part of a play! Through this "fucking around" (or making love!) we not only "read" Shakespeare more "authentically," we also paradoxically pay more attention to the printed words that have come down to us in a variety of slightly different versions. Shakespeare's words are here being presented not in the context of an "authentic" performance, but in a staged version of a performance that is supposed to be "fake," in the context of a show that itself is "fake" –professional actors in a television show, performing Shakespeare in quotation, as it were. The "text" is improvised out of our experience with these meta-narrative paradoxes, and the poetry becomes relevant to us through a complex interplay between word, voice, image, and the mediation of Shakespearean history (see Wright 2017 for more details and analysis of *Slings and Arrows*; for one of the most compelling essays on improvisation in a Shakespearean context see Greenblatt 1980).

I have intentionally used this example of Shakespeare-on-TV as a version of poetry/improvisation, precisely because it may be unexpected. Shakespeare was a poet, known mainly for his poetry in the context of dramatic performance (i.e., his plays as opposed to his sonnets, for example). But arguably his poetry is experienced by most people primarily as a scripted, written artifact, seemingly distant from improvisation (or performance). Shakespeare's words are assumed by most non-specialists to be a quasi-religious text, open to interpretation by actors but nevertheless

considered a holy writ. Those actors who interpret Shakespeare might be acting – but they're not improvising, are they? Placed in the larger context of historical transmission, the "staging" of improvisation, and the slipperiness of a supposedly fixed print culture, even the "timeless" poetry of Shakespeare has a time and place – for you, right now. Shakespeare's poetry, thus, straddles the line between poetry in/and improvisation in continually revealing ways (for more on the context of Shakespeare and improvisation, see Whitmore 2017; see also the work of the comedy troupe, the Improvised Shakespeare Company).[2]

Randy Fertel approaches the issue of "real" versus "fake" improvisation from a slightly different angle (see his piece in the present volume as well as Fertel 2015). He refers to the attempt to differentiate between more or less "authentic" forms of improvisation as "the Goldilocks gambit." Moving beyond the dilemma requires a reframing of improvisation, and Fertel uncovers a grand tradition of "rhetorical" improvisation in literature and other arts. By "rhetorical," Fertel indicates that improvisation is present even in the work of authors who are not spontaneously creating their work on the spot, or "improviso" (the Latin word for "unforeseen," and the modern origin of the English "improvisation"). The rhetoric of improvisation is found in texts *about* improvisation as well as gestures of rhetoric in texts that *imply* improvisation – texts like "Kubla Khan," which claim to be written in the moment, on the fly, even if they actually were not.

Fertel (2015) offers a multitude of examples from the history of Western literature to indicate the ubiquity of improvisational rhetoric. But perhaps one of his most succinct examples is also a musical one: Louis Armstrong's introductory solo to "West End Blues" (see Fertel 2015: 232 and his chapter in this volume).[3] Music scholars have noted that Armstrong may have performed some of the material in a spontaneous manner, but that he composed the version on the 1928 recording out of previous iterations. Nevertheless, the *sound* of his performance on record had the *effect* on listeners of what Fertel calls "witnessing a paradigm shift" (see Fertel's piece in this volume). Indeed, Fertel's argument in his epic *A Taste of Chaos: The Art of Literary Improvisation* (2015) is that improvisatory texts have historically both anticipated and reflected paradigm shifts in Western culture. The sheer innovative nature of Armstrong's composition – wrought via the hallmarks of jazz improvisation (blues feeling, blue notes, swing rhythm, etc.) – made it *sound as if it was improvised*, even though it was not (in the sense of "created spontaneously at the time of recording"). But Armstrong also offers a compelling example of improvisation/poetry, since "West End Blues" includes not just his revelatory trumpet playing but also his voice, imitating Jimmy Strong's clarinet in the Afro-diasporic tradition of call-and-response. Armstrong does not sing *words*; he scats, using sounds and pitches to mimic the sound of the clarinet. But as Brent Hayes Edwards has argued in his indispensable *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*, Armstrong's scatting created a history of jazz *singing* as well as, I would argue, jazz *poetry* (Edwards 2017: 27–56). All songs are poems, though not all poems are meant to be sung. Armstrong's voice improvises at the cusp of language and music; his poetry improvises new ways of conceptualizing improvisation/poetry, and reminds us that songs and poems share a lineage of improvisatory impulses (see also Wallace 2016; for a very different, but in my opinion, one of the most revelatory and *poetic* treatments of the song/music/poem distinction, see Pilzer 2012).

In his chapter for the present volume, Fertel offers another illuminating example of the "rhetoric of improvisation" – Jack Kerouac's *On the Road*. Originally created as a long typescript, and then edited over several years into several different published works (*On the Road* and *Visions of Cody*), Kerouac sought to convey the immediacy and energy advocated in his famous theory of "spontaneous bop prosody." But is the novel "actually improvised"? The feeling of immediacy, the seemingly "unscripted script" of Kerouac's prose had the *effect* of improvisation for many readers, despite the fact that the text itself was crafted into a "final" version and published in print. Rather than asking if Armstrong and Kerouac were "actually" improvising, these examples beg

the question of "what do we expect from an improvised text?" If time and performance can be "staged," then improvisation itself potentially becomes not only a process of creation but also a process of reception.

4 Reading the Performance, Improvising the Text

In my own previous work (see Wallace 2010 and 2016) I have noted the complexities of time and improvisation in the writing process: "Given the nature of writing, and the process of revision, editing, revision, editing, printing/publishing, reprinting, and so on, we *could* say that the entire writing process is an extended improvisation" (Wallace 2010: 15). If we look at the writing process in this way, the "text" or "product" is not the end result of the process, but rather a continually transforming part of that process. No longer a "binary opposition" of "process vs. product" or "improvisation vs. composition," writing itself becomes a kind of slow-motion improvisatory process, a dynamic interplay between author, text, and reader. The fluidity of supposedly fixed, printed, texts therefore makes it difficult to locate an "original" location or time of improvisation, especially if the author herself was involved in the various stages of print and production beyond the "original" moment of composition.

Foley (2002) has similarly provided a particularly incisive way to frame various species of oral poetry and indicate its performative nature, even when printed. He develops four categories for oral poetry: "Oral Performance," "Voiced Texts," "Voices from the Past," and "Written Oral Poems" (Foley 2002: 39–57). Along with similar taxonomies for interpreting the improvisatory nature of printed texts (see, for example, Pastras 1981 and Fertel 2015), Foley's categories provide an extremely useful way to approach the complexities of improvisation (even though Foley, like his mentor, Albert Lord, rarely uses that word – perhaps a continuing example of the "masking" trope) and the act of reading itself.

As indicated by the title of Foley's *How to Read an Oral Poem*, "reading" is a behavior not limited to printed texts – and Foley does not mean this only in the semiotic sense of the "reading" of signs, be they printed words or other icons. He also details the history of reading and how orality and literacy do not represent two opposed cultural perspectives. Nor does the transition between oral and literate culture represent an evolutionary progress in humanity. Rather, orality and literacy – in artistic practices such as poetry and in other modes of living – more often coexist as mutually dependent modes of "decoding" communication (Foley 2002: 77). Thus, an "Oral Performance" – unscripted, performed in "real-time" – can also be imitated in a "Written Oral Poem," which must also be read and understood as a species of oral poetry (Foley gives the examples of Eric Lönnrot's *Kalevala* and the "Ossian" poems of James Macpherson). "Voiced Texts" are poems initially written down or scripted but intended to be performed orally (i.e., spoken word or slam poetry, or, as I argue in my example above, much of Shakespeare). "Voices from the Past" is Foley's category for poems that we presume to be oral but which we only have textual examples of (for example, *Beowulf* or the Homeric poems). All these categories are encompassed by the larger category of oral poetry, which, again, for Foley is of primary importance in literary studies since it has existed for such a long period of human history.

These theories regarding the complexity of "reading" and improvising in print dovetail with continuing research from the field of performance studies, which has unpacked the ubiquity and complicated nature of "performance." Not merely the province of the stage or other arts, "performance" can connote a way of being as well as a way of knowing (for perspectives on improvisation and performance studies, see: Goldman 2010; Heble and Caines 2015; McMullen 2019). The theories of Landgraf, Fertel, and Foley, among other scholars, model situations wherein texts and contexts both embody and foreground the performative nature of life itself. And while we should be careful not to simplistically equate improvisation with performance, per se, foregrounding the performative

nature of texts, broadly conceived, is a useful way to conceptualize how improvisation works in a variety of situations, from "real-time" performance to the silent, solitary experience of reading a book.

If "reading" is more complicated than we assume, a "poetry reading" becomes a similarly intricate activity. Improvisation might not seem to be a large part of the "contemporary academic poetry reading" as profiled in detail by Lesley Wheeler (2008), but it could in fact be a way into investigating the improvisatory dimensions of both oral poetry and text-based poetry. Even though critic and poet Hazel Smith has also demurred at labeling many poetry readings (whether "academic" or "slam/spoken word") as improvised, she notes that new developments in 21st century political and technological life have made improvisation more diverse and ubiquitous in poetry, particularly in the way that new media such as the internet have made the boundary between poem and writer, poet and performer/audience, and other once-assumed binaries even more ambiguous (Smith 2016: 364). Her noting of the connections between underground rappers such as Myka 9 and writers more typically defined as "experimental" (from the fields of sound poetry, for example) is also welcome, again indicating the deep genealogies of discourse around improvisation (Smith 2016: 370). As with many of the scholars in the Critical Improvisation Studies field, Smith's notion that "poetic improvisation, an art of the present, keeps renewing and refreshing itself so that it is relevant to the lives we are living now" indicates a potential ethics in improvising itself, connected to older notions of the power of poetry in society at large (Smith 2016: 376). If, as many poets and audiences have believed throughout history, poetry as a cultural resource can have potentially wide-ranging and profound impacts on life, then an ability to not only control language but to skillfully improvise (particularly when life seems out of control) would be a useful skill for any poet.

5 A Conclusion

So what is improvised poetry, or improvisation/poetry? After our tour through some of the knottier debates involved in answering this question, I hope that you have identified your own examples of texts, authors, or events that would qualify, and which can be added to my list of Homer, Shakespeare, Coleridge, and Jayne Cortez, among others. Cortez, whose aptly titled poem "Poetry" provides the first epigraph for this chapter, is also a fitting poet with which to close our survey of poetry/improvisation. Additionally, she will act as a stand-in for an entire history of Afro-diasporic improvisation/poetry that I have largely elided in this chapter, due to the fact that I have written extensively about it elsewhere (Wallace 2010 and 2016; other scholars have described this context in much more lucid and valuable detail – I would particularly recommend Nielsen 1997; Jones 2011; and Edwards 2017).

Known for her career-spanning engagement with both poetry and music, as well as her dedication to the legacy of Afro-diasporic traditional and experimental art, Cortez's poetry is often a locus of improvisation ("staged" or otherwise). Her *poem* titled "Poetry" urges the reader not to rely too much on the supposed moral or emotional balms of poetry itself. More than some kind of "real world versus art" binary, however, Cortez instead offers a clever parable about improvisation and poetry. Jazz, the modern art form so closely connected with improvisation (and poetry), cannot be sung through the constricted mouth of an anteater. In other words, to improvise successfully, we have to shape words in their proper context. What is appropriate in one situation might not seem reliable in another. Improvisation via poetry can both help us create these contexts as well as decipher what they might mean. Furthermore, being open – unconstricted – to the contingencies and quicksilver changes of improvisation can be a poetry of its own. As a way of doing as well as a theory of living, poetry/improvisation can potentially help us thrive in a world that constantly improvises with and through us.

Related Topics

Fertel, R. (This Volume) "Improvisation's Ethical and Epistemological Challenge."
Landgraf, E. (This Volume) "Installed Improvisation: The Case of Erwin Redl."

Notes

1 "Madness in Great Ones" (2003) *Slings and Arrows*, Season 1, Episode 3.
2 Improvised Theater Company website: www.improvisedshakespeare.com.
3 L. Armstrong, "West End Blues" in *The Complete Hot Five and Hot Seven Recordings*, Columbia Records, CD 1928 (reissue 2000).

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IMPROVISATION IN PAINTING

Alessandro Bertinetto and Marcello Ruta

This chapter concerns the relevance of improvisation in regards to *painting*. Far from being obvious, this relevance is indeed doubtful. Painting, in fact, is ordinarily considered a typical case of a *non-performing art*, i.e., a kind of art in which spectators do not directly perceive the artist's performance, but aesthetically enjoy the final product. In these arts – photography and cinema, literature and non-performative poetry, painting and sculpture, architecture and design, etc.[1] – it is usually the case that process and product neither coincide nor happen simultaneously, and the aesthetic experience of the artistic achievement occurs once the performance has finished. We must then ask the following preliminary question, one that is both general and yet also intricate and intriguing: What role can improvisation play in arts in which the product of the performance, and not the performance itself, is the target, and the trigger, of the aesthetic experience?

Our short and preliminary answer is that the role played by improvisation in the non-performing arts is potentially threefold. More in detail: (1) Improvisation can be relevant as a modality of artistic production: artists might produce their artworks, e.g., paintings, by means of improvisation.[2] (2) Improvised artistic productions *may* leave *aesthetic traces* in the final products. However, leaving aside considerations of the artistic value of the item produced by means of improvisation, an improvised artistic production is not always or necessarily manifested aesthetically in the artistic product; in other words, it may be that no aspect of improvisation features among the aesthetic qualities of a successful artwork produced through improvisation. (3) The notion, or "category," of improvisation arguably might inform the *experience* of the finalized product; it might have an *aesthetic import* as a quality manifested in the artifact produced, but independent from its actual modality of production. In this case, the improvisational quality of an artwork might take the form of an invitation addressed to spectators to enjoy the artwork in a participatory and interactive way, thereby seeing it as a presentation of the producer through her product, and/or as a manifestation of what can be termed an "artistic grammar of contingency,"[3] as articulated through different aesthetic properties.

In the present chapter we discuss these potential roles for the specific case of painting. The first two roles of improvisation in painting are tackled in Section 1 and the last one in Section 2. Section 1 studies two classic cases in which pictorial improvisation appears as a modality (or even a method) of painting production. In Section 2, four paradigmatic cases are considered in which improvisation is not identified as a modality of artistic making, but rather as manifesting itself as an aesthetic quality that is perceivable both by the viewers and by the author herself. Since the history of painting is vast and rich in traditions and cultures, neither section seeks to be exhaustive; any such ambition would lead only to superficial outcomes. Instead, we prefer to focus on paradigmatic examples of the different roles played by improvisation in the pictorial field, concentrating on its contribution to artistic production and its impact on viewers' appreciation as an aesthetic quality.

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1 Pictorial Improvisation as Performance: Action Painting and Its Pre-Romantic Ancestor

Pictorial improvisation can surely take place in the mode of a performance; artists, for example, can paint in front of an audience, possibly interacting with other performers (musicians, dancers, etc.).[4] Although the pictorial product is ontologically distinct from the painting process, here the artistic theme seems to be the emergence of the work through the interaction between the painter, the materials, and any other performers. As in the case of a musical or dance improvisation, or like an improvised monologue or dialogue, here it is the *work in progress*, the performance, in fact, that constitutes the focus of aesthetic appreciation. However, once the performance is over, a durable product is left that can take on autonomous artistic values, certainly as a document of the past performance, as happens with audio, visual, or audiovisual recordings (and, to some extent, also with transcriptions) in the case of musical, dance, or theatrical performances, and potentially in other ways too.

In a sense, this is precisely the case for the two examples most commonly cited as paradigmatic of pictorial improvisation: Jackson Pollock and Pablo Picasso, portrayed, respectively, in the films of Hans Namuth (1950)[5] and of Henri-Georges Clouzot (1956)[6] as performers improvising their works *in fieri*. Here the painter becomes an actor on the cinematographic stage. The works of improvisation are not so much the paintings produced by the pictorial action, which have taken on their own artistic (and economic) value and can be contemplated at MoMA or elsewhere; rather, the real works, so it seems, are the *filmed performances* of the American "action painter" who dances on a surface, dripping paint that randomly produces the squiggles typical of his paintings; or of the Spanish painter who creates and continuously modifies the meaning of the figures he depicts through imaginative constructions and erasures. Even neglecting the editing work that transforms footage of long and repetitious painting sessions into a few minutes of spontaneous creative magic, the aura of improvisation that the artworks of the two painters acquire seems due primarily to the films themselves, which present them as direct, spontaneous, and continuously evolving expressions of the artists. Such performances seem to transform painting into a performing art and, more specifically, an improvisational one. However, things are not so simple, as we will argue by discussing the Pollock case in particular.

As is well known, Harold Rosenberg coined the expression "action painting" in his article "The American Action Painters" (1952), referring to Pollock without naming him. Here are some excerpts from that seminal article:

> At a certain moment the canvas began to appear to one American painter after another as an arena in which to act rather than as a space in which to reproduce, re-design, analyze or "express" an object, actual or imagined. What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event. The painter no longer approached his easel with an image in his mind; he went up to it with material in his hand to do something to that other piece of material in front of him. The image would be the result of this encounter. It is pointless to argue that Rembrandt or Michelangelo worked in the same way. You don't get Lucrece with a dagger out of staining a piece of cloth or spontaneously putting forms into motion upon it. She had to exist some place else before she got on the canvas, and the paint was Rembrandt's means for bringing her here. […] Here the principle, and the difference from the old painting, is made into a formula. A sketch is the preliminary form of an image the *mind* is trying to grasp. […] If a painting is an action, the sketch is one action, the painting that follows it another. The second cannot be "better" or more complete than the first. There is just as much significance in their difference as in their similarity. […] Criticism must begin by recognizing in the painting the assumptions inherent in its mode of creation. Since the painter has become an actor, the spectator has

> to think in a vocabulary of action: its inception, duration, direction-psychic state, concentration and relaxation of the will, passivity, alert waiting. He must become a connoisseur of the gradations between the automatic, the spontaneous, the evoked. […] The big moment came when it was decided to paint… Just TO PAINT. The gesture on the canvas was a gesture of liberation, from Value – political, aesthetic, moral.
>
> *(Rosenberg 1952: 22–3)*

Even if "improvisation" is not explicitly mentioned, it seems that, according to Rosenberg, the key difference between traditional painting and *action* painting can legitimately be compared with the difference between producing a musical work or a theatrical piece and improvising: in the first case one realizes a sketch of the work *in one's mind* and then executes it materially; in the second case, the material realization of the work coincides with its invention. Rosenberg's statement conveys that in action painting the pictorial performance is improvised in an essential (or at least very significant) sense.

It could be argued, though, that the assumption that Rembrandt had *Lucretia* in his head from the start is unrealistic. By suggesting this, Rosenberg seems to be embracing the so-called "ideal theory of art," defended in particular by Croce and Collingwood (Croce 1929; Collingwood 1947), according to which the proper artwork is the mental image generated in the artist's mind. However, among the many theoretical problems posed by this theory, surely an important one is that it does not adequately consider the importance of the interaction between the artist and the materials at her disposal for the gestation and the production of artworks. As one might argue by adopting a conception of artistic making such as that elaborated in Dewey's philosophy of artistic experience (Dewey 1934), artistic creativity, including the production of paintings, seems to entail improvisational aspects (see Sawyer 2000); and this is true also in painting that is not categorized as "action painting," as shown, for example, by the pictorial technique devised by Gerhard Richter (see Section 2.3). Therefore, we cannot exclude that improvisational elements also insinuated themselves into the creation of Rembrandt's *Lucretia*, including the sense of surprise aroused by what we encounter on the canvas. Yet none of this is decisive as regards the aim of our present reflections. Rather, we want dwell on another aspect of Rosenberg's interpretation of Pollock: Rosenberg's analysis seems to be justified not by Pollock's pictorial artworks (think of his *One: Number 31*, 1950, exhibited at MoMA in New York), but, rather, by reference to Namuth's photographs and film: as has been suggested, his description of action painting was crucially influenced by having seen the documentary.[7]

In particular, one might suspect that Rosenberg's view of Pollock as the symbol of the emancipatory gesture of an American artistic avant-garde that liberates itself from the values inherited from tradition – all this synthetized in the predicate "spontaneity" (see Belgrad 1998) – is due not so much to the perception of his paintings, but to the vision of the film that immortalized his performances. Certainly, it can be argued that information about how a painting was produced – which cannot be retrieved from the final image produced by the painter – affects the perception of the painting. Of course it would be unwarranted to claim that every viewing of a documentary on a painter's performance constitutes a *bias* as regards the perception of her artworks. But the specific case of Namuth's film is so impressive that it can influence – as well as deceive – viewers of the finished painting, particularly when, in Rosenberg's words, we are prompted to recognize "in the painting the assumptions inherent in its mode of creation."

In the same vein as Rosenberg, in an essay focused on "how intention and chance, freedom and coercion can interact in the creation of a painting" (Thürlemann 1992: 63; our translation: A. B. and M. R.), Felix Thürlemann claims that "[l]ike no other, Pollock's painting can record the dynamic course that led to its creation as a permanent, visible trace in the result" (Thürlemann 1992: 70; our translation: A.B. and M.R.). Yet is this really so? If we cannot precisely determine

how certain, specific perceptual properties of the painted artifact are linked to the process of its production, Thürlemann's claim risks interpretation as mere *stipulation*. Accordingly, when we look at a Pollock painting from the dripping period (another example: *Autumn Rhythm*, 1950, MoMA, New York), we will assume that the image we see is spontaneous (Rosenberg) or dynamic (Thürlemann), only because we judge its process of production as spontaneous or dynamic.[8]

We are far from endorsing Greenberg's formalism (see Endnote 7); nor do we deny that etiology, i.e., the history of production of the artwork, is important in order to understand and appreciate its artistic quality. As typically argued by contextualists (see, e.g., Levinson 2017: 17–27), knowing how an artwork was produced can be necessary to discern its artistic qualities and aesthetic properties. Knowing how Pollock produced the painting may help us appreciate the play of shapes and colors it displays, as well as admire the artistic originality of his production method, both of which can be considered part of the qualities included in the artwork's "focus of appreciation" (Davies 2004: 23 and 50 ff.). It is certainly possible, and even plausible, to argue that an artwork can be rightly understood and adequately appreciated only if its history of production is known.[9] But this does not entail that the painting, as finished product, must carry within itself perceptual traces of its process of production. And just as the nature of the production process cannot be traced within the painting as artifact, *the aesthetic properties of a painting cannot be reliably derived from the history of its production*. This is due to the fact that, like it or not, even an action painting artwork can be more or less felicitous, independently from it resulting from a specific kind of artistic performance. Of course, as implicitly underlined by Rosenberg's point on the absence of a mental sketch in action painting, this kind of artistic achievement cannot be understood as approaching an already mentally formed ideal model; still, the aesthetic felicitousness of the painting remains a property of the action painting *artwork*. An action painting artwork can be felicitous by succeeding in different ways. And, in the case at stake, this artistic success is supposed to consist in the fact that relevant properties of the pictorial improvised performance are transferred into its product: more specifically, in the fact that the painting allegedly exemplifies aesthetic qualities such as spontaneity (Rosenberg) or dynamism (Thürlemann). While *knowing* that the painting has been improvised can help us *see* it as produced by means of improvisation, perceivers may nevertheless fail to see traces of improvisation in the product, even when they have this information: not necessarily because improvisation is not perceivable *a priori*, but, rather, because the artwork, in this respect, is a failed one. Moreover, let us assume that, conversely, we can experience spontaneity as a property of a felicitous improvised painting. Might we thereby reliably perceive it as a trace of the spontaneity of the production process? This does not seem to be the case, the proof being that aesthetic spontaneity (or dynamism) is often an aspect of the artist's studied technique, a proper formal discipline. The risk of unwarranted stipulation, therefore, doubles, since not only can an improvised painting process leave no trace of itself in the painting (as in a non-felicitous one), but also because spontaneity or dynamicity perceived in a painting do not reliably signify an improvised process of production (since non-improvisational artifacts can be perceived as spontaneous, dynamic, and improvised).

Since we cannot assign an improvisatory character to an artwork based on the fact that its process of production involved improvisation, we cannot recognize, in a reliable way, some of its aesthetic properties as traces of certain properties of the process of production. On the one hand, the improvisational character of an artwork can be the result of a technique learnt and mastered by the author. On the other, an artwork spontaneously produced can lack any of those qualities that we, naïvely, might expect from it. Specifically regarding *action painting*, for example, one can legitimately question whether Pollock's paintings really exemplify the properties of their production process so appreciated by Rosenberg. In fact, their forms may appear as decorations following precisely and carefully prepared formal patterns. Pollock's alleged absolute freedom of construction risks appearing to the observer as the reproduction of variations of pre-established action models,

variations that generate works that tend towards rather traditional and predictable harmonies and balances, and which do not convey any feeling of improvisation (cf. Kiefer 2011: 166 f.). In some cases, a non-improvised work can manifest an aesthetic appearance of improvisation better than a truly improvised work.

This reasoning seems to confirm the idea that, in relation to the question of the role played by improvisation in painting, *action painting* basically *behaves like a performing art*. The argument that in front of a Pollock there is no way to establish – in the absence of information on the history of production – whether the properties that seem to depend on improvisation really do depend on improvisation, or whether they are, instead, the result of accurate calculation, apply also to performing arts, where, in theory, genuine improvisation should possess a specific aesthetic value. Faced with an improvising musician, you can still believe that he is actually performing a very sophisticated score previously written; you might think that he is actually performing something like Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's *Fantasia*. In the same way, watching an improvising actor you might think that she is actually following a script deliberately conceived and written in such a way as to elicit the impression of spontaneity in the audience. The only way to appreciate these performances as genuine improvisations is to *know that they are* genuine improvisations. But where, at this point, is the difference with Pollock? In brief, both as performing process and as artifactual object, improvisation seems to face the same problem: it can of course be experienced, but cannot, strictly speaking, be reliably *perceived*. In the realm of the performing arts as well, two artistic phenomena, one produced by means of improvisation, the other not, may be perceptually *indiscernible* (cf. Bertinetto 2016a). Performing and non-performing arts are analogous in this respect: the only way out of a mere stipulation ("what we are experiencing is really an improvisation") is to base the bracketed claim on propositional knowledge relating to the history of production of the performance or of the artwork. Direct knowledge through perceptual experience must be abandoned in favor of trust in the *aesthetic testimony* of the producers of the artworks, as well as of documents like audiovisual recordings; neither of which, unfortunately, are always reliable.

This analogy notwithstanding, improvisation in the performing arts still differs from improvisation in the production of artworks designed to be exhibited, including action painting artworks. We can grant (albeit pending further discussion) that we are able to discern the improvised character of a musical, theatrical, or dance performance and to appreciate its aesthetic qualities only if we *know* that it is an improvisation. This does not exclude that it is solely in the performing arts that *we can only become acquainted* with the artistic product *by becoming acquainted* with the creative process of performers who make real-time decisions on what to do and how to do it, based on unexpected events occurring during the performance. For instance, a musical performance of an improvised blues piece is not only its *history of production* but also the *manifestation* of the blues, since the very *coming into existence* of the blues through the performance is also the only way for listeners to *experience* it. For this reason, when improvisation takes place in the performing arts, performance, and not just its outcome (the produced sounds or words), is the main focal point of aesthetic appreciation. For this same reason – and this is a key difference – while the aural experience of an artifact produced by virtue of an improvised performance in the performing arts (for example a CD) is a secondary experience compared to attending the live performance, in the case of action painting the focus of the aesthetic experience is – or *should* be – the artwork, not its producing performance.[10] In any case, Pollock's masterworks are his produced paintings, not performances such as the one filmed by Namuth.[11] And this difference is due not to simple cultural conventions, but to an underlying ontological difference. Only in improvisation in the performing arts (which, it should be remembered, is a matter of degree: not everything in an improvisation is improvised)[12] the production process is (temporally, at least) *inseparable* from the product: a product that, unlike artifactual artworks to be exhibited, owes part of its value precisely to the fact that its experience is something unique and unrepeatable. In this sense, in the case of

action painting, and differently from an improvised musical, theatrical, or dance performance, the difference between performance and artwork (in the object sense) remains clear.

This point can be further analyzed by considering the issue of *amendability*. An improvised musical, theatrical, or dance performance cannot be corrected (the correction, at best, simply becomes part of the performance that is ongoing). Yet the painter can retrace her steps, so that the artifactual artwork can undergo transformations up until the point that the artist declares it finished (and even later, although independently from the artist's intentions). As can be seen from the aforementioned films of Pollock's and Picasso's painting activities, this is exactly what happens with Pollock, and even more evidently with Picasso: in every phase of their work the two artists continually modify what they have previously painted, something that is obviously impossible in a musical or theatrical improvisation, in which mistakes cannot be erased (although their normative valence *as* mistakes can be changed by what follows them: cf. Bertinetto 2016b). Hence, in action painting the focus of aesthetic appreciation remains the painting as an enduring artifactual artwork, while the performance, as temporal event, is its production process, as documented in the film. Conversely, the aesthetic target of an improvisation in the performing arts is the performing improvisation itself, and its recording (film or CD) does not amount purely to a documentation of the production process, but also manifests, of course, in a more or less reliable way,[13] the artwork itself. In painting, there is an ontological gap between artwork and performance that cannot be ignored, and which is responsible for differences between the roles of improvisation in painting, on the one hand, and music, theatre, and dance, on the other.

A similar argument, at least in relation to the *ontological gap* between artistic performances and paintings as artistic products, can plausibly be made for the *blotting* technique, conceived and implemented by Alexander Cozens in the 18th century, which could be considered a sort of *ancestor* of action painting. Cozens' technique, as described in the treatise *A New Method of Assisting the Invention in Drawing Original Compositions of Landscapes* (1785), consists in ensuring that the image (usually a landscape) is formed through a process in which improvisation plays the main role. First of all, stains are produced on the canvas through the uncontrolled application of color with the hands. Then the splashes of color invite, as it were, the artist's imagination to select, by means of exploiting the phenomenon of *pareidolia*, the stains most suitable for generating possible compositions of figures (an idea inherited from Leonardo),[14] which will be then reproduced in a traditional way. (Other painters would later neglect this phase, accentuating the randomness, the occasionality, and the precariousness of the artistic outcome.)

Before proceeding further, some points should be highlighted:

1 Despite the title of the treatise, Cozens' procedure cannot and must not be considered a mechanical procedure. Rather, it is an imaginative and, we could add, creative and improvisational procedure, in which talent plays a fundamental role. The "blotting method" works by *paving the way to the improvisational action of imagination*, i.e., by providing a procedure in which imagination can be freely exercised:

> Blotting is not a kind of mechanical process that necessarily and always produces original artworks. The innovative potential of improvisation rather requires a high degree of experience and artistic talent, "genius" as Angelo[15] says, in order to achieve satisfactory results. The power of imagination, the strength of the imagination, is of crucial importance. Anyone who is unable to see anything in the ink blots and spots of color will not be able to improvise from them in order to create an image.
>
> *(Weltzien 2014: 466; our translation: A. B. and M. R.)*

2 An autopoietic role[16] is assigned to the artistic material and, in interacting with it, the artist appears first of all as a witness to the procedures he sets in motion. The image becomes a

living agent that produces perceptual behaviors and experiences, stimulating reactions and imaginative interactions. In this regard, the key role of imagination and materiality in the formative process of the artwork should be stressed: their coming to the fore in the artistic process suggests the improvisational quality of the resulting artwork. In fact, as maintained in Beisbart's contribution in this volume, improvisation is, by definition, opposed to planned action, and its development is exposed to the unforeseeable aspects found in every concrete situation: improvisation responds imaginatively to its situation without imposing upon it a previously chosen form. This is further emphasized by the fact that such a method also envisages the possibility of collective participation in the process of producing the painting:

> Beyond improvisational staining, Cozens's visual arts are not described as the work of an isolated individual, but as a product of communication and interaction. The material is assigned an active autopoietic role, the artist himself occasionally appears as an astonished, passive witness to the processes he has initiated. A dialogue between the material and the artist is recognized in the manufacturing process, and the individual phases of refinement can be carried out by different people.
>
> *(Weltzien 2014: 476; our translation: A. B. and M. R.)*

3 This procedure is aimed at producing an aesthetic effect in the pictorial work: this must exemplify *vitality* rather than *perfection*. In other words, the principles underlying Cozens' pictorial procedure are primarily understood aesthetically, not practically, as the exercise of freedom or spontaneity, since they must find an adequate *aesthetic counterpart* and *manifestation* in the pictorial product that can be summarized via the category of vitality (liveness).

> Achieving the liveliness of the presentation is more important than complying with a general set of rules. Nature as a producing principle that is aligned with the paradigm of growth is a more desirable goal of artistic activity than to satisfy the arbitrary demands of formal academic representation. […] Complete control drives the art away. A certain amount of improvisation, on the other hand, fearlessly facing the chaos of colors and the onslaught of the formless, will lead to rich returns.
>
> *(Weltzien 2014: 467; our translation: A. B. and M. R.)*

The emphasis on the aesthetic features of the final product – which makes Cozens' procedure, at least in intentions, different from Pollock's action painting – shows that the improvisational method is not understood as mechanically guaranteeing the liveness of the paintings: the method, rather, enables, or at least facilitates, the production of a lively painting. But the method's improvisational character is not immediately reflected in a correspondent aesthetic property of the painting produced: vitality. In this respect, the improvisational character is lost if the produced painting is not *felicitous*, that is, if it does not exemplify that expected aesthetic feature to which the painter aims.

All this allows us to formulate the thesis with which we close the first part of this chapter: for specifically ontological reasons, in improvised painting (such as *action painting*), or in painting practices having relevant improvisational aspects (such as *blotting*), the improvisational process does not immediately have an aesthetic import. This is also true of non-performing arts more generally: in point of fact, while in the performing arts the audience can become acquainted with the artwork only through the experience of the performing process, non-performing arts viewers can become acquainted with the artwork only (or at least typically) once the process of its production is finalized.

Nonetheless, this says nothing about the specific aesthetic import of improvisation in painting and its articulation in specific aesthetic properties. *Dynamicity* (Pollock) and *vitality* (Cozens) can

be understood as *aesthetic desiderata* of an improvised artwork only in the normative framework of these (and stylistic similar) paintings; but these are not properties specifically related to improvisation. In fact, they have been considered aesthetic desiderata of many styles in many different arts that do not countenance improvisation as a relevant process of artistic production: many *Ascensions of Jesus* are meant to be dynamic and vital, for instance, while being miles away from any aesthetics of improvisation.

2 Improvisation and Aesthetic Properties of Painting: A Pluralistic Approach

In this section, we explore how improvisation can play a role in the aesthetic reception of paintings, not in their production alone. Our task is to provide a first articulation of improvisation as an *aesthetic category* of painting: we take the concrete examples we will refer to as paradigmatic of *aesthetic properties* specifically related to improvisation, independently from particular stylistic frameworks.

We already tackled this issue, albeit indirectly, in Section 1, where it was observed that information about the improvisatory production of a painting can impact its aesthetic appreciation. This point does not exclusively concern artistic improvisation, but rather the more general question of how aesthetic judgment can be influenced by non-perceptual knowledge of extra-aesthetic factors (a classic, and much debated, case being the question of the historical authenticity of paintings).[17] Thus, this section has a different aim: we discuss the specific *aesthetic import* of improvisation in the aesthetic appreciation of a pictorial image. As we suggest, the aesthetic relevance of improvisation for the experience of the painted image is not identifiable with a single "improvisational" aesthetic feature of that image; rather, improvisation is *articulated, displayed, and thematized* through/by different aesthetic properties of the painting. Therefore, without at all presuming to be exhaustive, we briefly analyze four concrete cases as paradigmatic for different kinds of aesthetic manifestations of improvisation in the pictorial product. Accordingly, this section will be articulated into four sub-sections.

2.1 Pictorial Improvisation as Depiction of the Unconscious: Kandinsky's Improvisations

Firstly, improvisation can appear aesthetically as the pictorial exhibition of a spontaneous, inspired, and unconscious feeling. An invitation to observe the painting in this way is addressed to viewers by Kandinsky's *Improvisations*. In his essay *Concerning the Spiritual in the Art* (1911), Kandinsky programmatically proposes a threefold typology of paintings: *impressions*, *improvisations*, and *compositions*. Improvisations differ from *impressions* in that their inspirational source is not the external but the internal world, and they differ from *compositions* in that they do not externalize conscious, purposeful, calculated, and cognitively elaborated feelings, but rather "impressions of 'internal nature,'" which are unconscious, sudden, and immediate (cf. Kandinsky 2008: 116).

Yet Kandinsky's *Improvisations* are not literally "improvisations" (Thürlemann 1992: 65), and not because they seem to require the mastery of a technique – this is indeed not an obstacle to the occurrence of improvisation, but rather a precondition for a felicitous artistic accomplishment in different kinds of artistic improvisational practices. The point is, rather, that Kandinsky's *Improvisations* were planned and prepared by the artist through sketches and preparatory studies, thereby being, in a sense, composed in advance. Therefore, they can be compared in this respect to those musical pieces (*impromptus*, *preludes*, *fantasias*), which, although thoroughly composed and fine-tuned, invite the interpreter to perform them *as if they were improvised*;[18] besides, here the interpreter's role is played, as it were, by the recipients themselves, who are to perceive the painting *as if* the time of its mental ideation (i.e., the general plan of the painting as well as the specific

decisions to apply a color on the canvas with a particular stroke), the time of its material realization (i.e., the execution of the painting, including the gestures with which the artist's arm moves the brush), and the time of the viewers' aesthetic appreciation all coincide. In other words, viewed as improvisation, the painting is perceived as a spontaneous exhibition of feelings or moods, occurring in the painter and echoed in the viewer – who participates in the pictorial generation of emotions – through the painting itself. Hence, Kandinsky's *Improvisations* highlight improvisation as immediate internal affective *motus* – as opposed to the reasoning, reflective, and calculating side of human nature. Aesthetically it manifests itself not only as *spontaneity* (which, in Kandinsky's typology, also concerns the impressions from external objects), but also as *depth* - as a pictorial expression of the artist's interior life and, by aesthetic empathy, also the viewer's.

2.2 Pictorial Improvisation as Synthetic Depiction of the Fugacity of Reality: Sketch and Urban Sketchers

A second important aspect of the aesthetics of pictorial improvisation is best highlighted by the *sketch*: the rapid freehand realization of the depiction of an object. Traditionally, the sketch is a provisional product designed either to be integrated or corrected in order to produce the finished work or to serve as a model of the artwork. However, by the will of the artist or due to historical and cultural developments in aesthetic taste, sketches can become, or at least be perceived as, finished artworks. By considering their sketches artworks, painters perform an operation similar to that of composers such as Giacinto Scelsi (1905-1988) who composed by improvising and recording the result of his musical improvisations: in this case, the musical improvisation is a sort of sketch, which, after being recorded, transcribed, arranged, and orchestrated, can become a musical work. The pictorial sketch, on the other hand, can become an artwork in its own right, provided that the artist decides that the pictorial outcome of her quick freehand marking deserves to be offered to viewers for their contemplation. Despite the ontological differences between the musical and the pictorial case, they both have a similar aesthetic "focus of appreciation." Perceivers are invited to appreciate the freshness and occasional nature of artistic production, to understand the constraint of its "realtimeness" as a stimulus for the inventive engagement with available materials, and to focus, through the dynamic appearance of "unfinished"[19] musical or pictorial figures and gestures, on the artistic object as an index that refers pragmatically to the action that generated it and to the situation of its unfolding.[20]

A telling example is the practice of *urban sketchers* who – taking up Claude Monet's idea that the painting should be made *in situ* to restore the first "impression"[21] – enjoy the artistic pleasures of drawing on the spot (the practice is also called "drawing on location"): the place where one is situated becomes a propitious opportunity for artistic production, inviting a responsive and creative adaptation to the contingent situation, which requires the artist's participatory engagement and committed curiosity).[22] The attempt to "catch life on the run" and "to record changing light and moving subjects" in their outdoors drawings induce in urban sketchers a "sense of urgency" that forces them "to improvise and act on intuition."[23]

Hence, due to the particular condition of its realization, basing the aesthetic judgment of an urban sketch on the assessment of its lesser or greater formal completeness is not necessarily illegitimate *per se*. Yet this attitude would miss the point of its specific aesthetic dimension. The urban sketch is not intended as a demonstration of virtuosic care for formal detail, yet it may show another kind of artistic virtuosity: the ability to pictorially grasp life in progress and to capture the fleeting moment. Hence, as devoted as she is (or may be) to the achievement of this artistic goal, the artist can be consciously ready to sacrifice attention for minute formal details. Yet, importantly, unlike *street art* (see Baldini's contribution in this volume), where political and legal issues play a relevant role in shaping the improvisational quality of the artistic practice, in

the case of urban sketches the urgency, time constraints, and responsive adaptation to the unforeseeable circumstances of the painting practice matter only (or at least primarily) *aesthetically* as sources of a specific and situated pictorial expressiveness. They are practical conditions *self-instituted* by the painter for pictorially expressing aesthetic qualities such as fugacity, ephemerality, and precariousness – aesthetic qualities indeed very pertinent to improvisation. Thus, in the urban sketch the fleeting moment appears aesthetically on two interconnected but separated levels: at the content level, since the painter has the ambition to portray the event as it occurs *hic et nunc*; and at the formal level, since in order to accomplish this purpose the painter is forced to sacrifice details by adopting, as it were, "synthetic" rather than "analytical" techniques, thereby impressing in the drawing that improvisational imprint that is to be formally enjoyed for its expressive qualities, independently from extra-aesthetic issues.

Obviously, unlike an improvisational event, sketches (including "urban" ones) can always be amended.[24] Nonetheless, this does not contradict the aesthetic specificity of a sketch, as described above. Correcting a sketch to smooth it out to the point of making it look like a well-finished painting would literally be counterproductive, because what the painter wanted the sketch to express would be lost. A felicitous aesthetic emendation of a sketch seems plausibly to be one that intensifies exactly that aspect of *hic et nunc* production, which, for various reasons, was not sufficiently exemplified in its first version. Once again: the sketch exemplifies improvisation in aesthetic terms, as a depiction of the fleeting moment, or as a manifestation of the "feeling of being in the moment and connected with whatever you're sketching,"[25] e.g., through focusing on details (Figure 40.1) or gestures (Figure 40.2).

Figure 40.1 Hero Lotti, *On the 17.24 from Waterloo*, 27/12/2016. Photo courtesy of the artist.

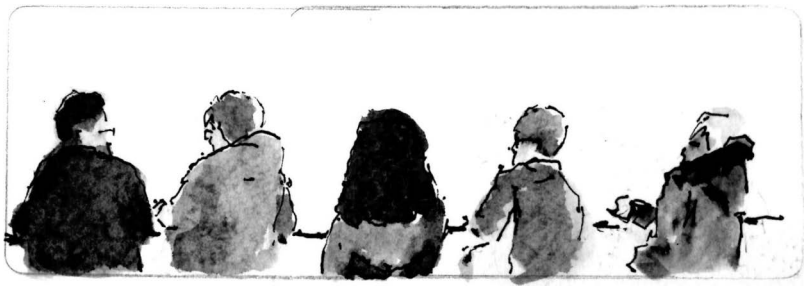

Figure 40.2 Hero Lotti, *Oro Caffè, 10.30 am*, 3/12/2019. Photo courtesy of the artist.

In this focus on the *aesthetic effect*, the difference with action painting becomes evident. As observed above, the impression of improvisation portrayed by a Pollock painting seems to depend more on seeing Namuth's film than on the aesthetic qualities of the painting. The signs and colored spots of the painting, in fact, have rather standardized and predictable formal patterns – the effects of repeated and habitual physical gestures – instead of properly showing the unpredictability of the interaction with the specific painting situation. After all, although improvisation (perhaps rather ritualized) features in the causal chain of their production, all of Pollock's paintings realized with the dripping technique are usually recognizable indiscriminately as tokens of the "Pollock" type, without arousing significant aesthetic surprise in the observer. With urban sketches, things are different. Knowing whether a given sketch actually was improvised does not play a fundamental role in our aesthetic judgment. In a sketch, you can aesthetically appreciate the synthetic representation of the fleeting reality, just as while listening to a musical *Fantasia* you can enjoy a sudden harmonic change, which aesthetically appears as improvised even though it was actually composed. In a sense, (aesthetically successful) sketches portray the *improvisational* – ephemeral, provisional, precarious, unexpected, unstable, etc. – *aspect of the world*, both formally and in terms of content, regardless of how the pictorial act was actually produced, and perhaps amended, after a first unsatisfactory attempt.

2.3 Pictorial Improvisation as Aesthetic Emergence: Richter's Autopoietic Painting Method

Beyond *fugacity*, a further aesthetic aspect of pictorial improvisation manifests itself when paintings appear as emerging from outside the painter's intentional control, as if the materials were taking shape autonomously. In this case, spectators (including the author herself as a viewer of her work) perceive the appearance of aesthetic unexpectedness, and not only the imprint of a (perhaps premeditated and prepared) action in its product. The artwork may *emerge aesthetically*, outside the artist's control, precisely in virtue of physical constraints self-imposed by the artists themselves, as in Matthew Barney's *Drawings Restraint* project (1987–2010; see Sasse 2014). More generally, the autonomous emergence of the aesthetic appearance in the painting happens as a consequence of the interaction, with unpredictable outcomes, between materials and artist, thereby exhibiting the decentralization of the subject-author, the distributed nature of artistic creativity,[26] and the provisionality, precariousness, gratuitousness, and unexpectedness of the pictorial shapes.

In this last respect, Gerard Richter's paintings are paradigmatic. As observed by Edgar Landgraf (2018), Richter's pictorial method, even if not literally improvisational, actually makes programmatic use of a key element of improvisation in the performing art: their *autopoietic* development. Hence, as Landgraf elaborates while commenting on Corinna Belz's 2011 documentary *Gerhard Richter Painting*,

> [w]hile on the surface, Richter's work process might not qualify as improvisational, the documentary captures how the production of art (in the modern Western world) is bound up with improvisation even if practiced in a studio and in the absence of a physically present audience. Early on, the documentary shows Richter's surprise about one of his paintings, which ended up looking quite dark and gloomy despite the initial parameters (bright colors) he had set. As the interviewer notes how much the painting changed, Richter responds: "That's the thing. They do what they want. I planned something quite different, pretty colorful" (5'43" – translations here and subsequently are mine [E. L.]). As in improvisation, the burden of a work's composition, Richter confirms, lies not on the beginning, but on the step-by-step execution, and on finding an end. Richter suggests that at the beginning, he can "theoretically, practically smear anything he wants" on the canvas. "This first creates a state to which I have to react, which I have to change or destroy. Then it develops on its own, not on its own, but without plan, without reason" (54'20").
>
> *(Landgraf 2018: 215)*

Deeply linked to the *emergence of the aesthetic appearance* is the *surprise effect*. However, this manifests itself more to the artist than to the public. Almost magically, the artist finds before her something she had previously not at all envisioned, thereby showing that not all paintings that are not literally improvised are born from an image already present in the artist's mind. Improvisation is here indicated not by the expression of fugacity, but rather by the *unexpectedness* of the aesthetic appearance. The final product escapes, *programmatically*, the intentions of the artist, whose pictorial method self-reflectively exhibits the autopoietic process of pictorial production.

2.4 Pictorial Improvisation as Variation: Cézanne's Depictions of Monte Saint-Victoire

The last aesthetic aspect of pictorial improvisation we want to consider is the element of *variation*, as exemplified by the different *versions* of the image *Mount Saint-Victoire*, painted by Cézanne. Even if variations and versions are often not the result of an improvised performance but rather of a complex and refined compositional process, the notions of "variation" and "version" can be considered as belonging to the semantics of improvisation, that is, as stages of the evolving and unforeseeably changing life of an artwork.[27] In this sense, as John Gilmour (2000) has claimed, Cézanne's paintings are to be conceived of as landscape improvisations that dismantle inherited visual codes and find a new expressive style inspired by the poetics of impression. In this case, improvisation does not show itself as anti-idiomatic creation, which *a priori* rejects any codified language (as has sometimes been the case in "free" improvisation in the musical realm).[28] Rather, Cézanne's multiple versions of the *Mount Saint-Victoire* painting appear, as Bourdieu would have stated it, as a series of "regulated improvisations of the habitus" (Bourdieu 1979: 21), i.e., of the socially shared, typified, and conventionalized (albeit informally) standardization of human cultural behavior. The variation, therefore, does not manifest itself aesthetically as improvisation under the aspect of the "variation on a theme," which has often been predominant in the musical field, but, as it were, under the aspect of the variation on an *idiom*, or of an *expressive style*:

> The sense in which these paintings are improvisations depends less upon their being various versions of the same subject matter than it does on the way Cézanne utilizes the painting process itself to create improvisatory gestures. What I mean is that he so alters the idea of the naturalized image that his contemporaries tended to be confused about how to read these paintings. This is especially true of his handling of color, which alters received ideas about the

> role that color plays both in nature and in landscape painting. But [it is also true of the way] how the brushwork contributes to a sense of receding planes, giving us a new basis on which to interpret an image as representing depth.
>
> *(Gilmour 2000: 200)*

In this case, too, pictorial improvisation does not require a brushstroke action to be truly improvised. Moreover, it does not even need to manifest any uncontrolled effect of the unconscious, as in Kandinsky's aesthetics of pictorial improvisation: as Gilmour (2000: 191) rightly points out, "Kandinsky's suggestion that the improvisational element in painting begins in something spontaneous and unconscious stands in opposition to Cezanne's painting practices." Since pure or absolutely free improvisation does not really exist, what matters, in the case of Cézanne as in the other cases cited in this section, is that improvisation emerges as an aesthetically perceptual expressive feature, in its various configurations: as spontaneity, as an encounter with fugacity, as emergent autopoietic process, and finally as a controlled transgression of an expressive idiom.

3 Conclusion

Despite the plurality of aesthetic manifestations of pictorial improvisation that we have surveyed, in view of the discussion in Section 1 we may venture a general concluding remark. The main requirement for the aesthetic relevance of improvisation in painting is that the painting exemplify the (not strictly physical) gesture from which it results. But this exemplification does not necessarily need to exhibit the producer as the immediate source of the depicted image and, as it were, as imprinted in the image itself. It may also manifest one of the possible declinations of improvisation as an aesthetic phenomenon of sudden and unconscious spontaneity, of fugacity and precariousness, of uncontrolled, unexpected, and surprising autopoietic emergence, as well as of variation and alteration of an expressive idiom. As we have remarked, the list of declinations proposed here has no pretensions of being exhaustive: it is, rather, a first attempt to articulate aspects of a notion, which, in the pictorial domain just as elsewhere, reveals unexpected richness.[29]

Related Topics

Arthurs, T. (This Volume) "The Risk of Improvised Music: An Ethnographic Approach."
Baldini, A. L. (This Volume) "Street Art and the Politics of Improvisation."
Beisbart, C. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Action Theory."
Bertinetto, A. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Artistic Photography."
Fertel, R. (This Volume) "Improvisation's Ethical and Epistemological Challenge."
Goldoni, D. (This Volume) "Forms of Improvisation and Experimentalism."
Matteucci, G. (This Volume) "Improvisation as Resonance."
Mouëllic, G. (This Volume) "Improvisation, Machines, Cinema."
Ruta, M. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Orientation."

Notes

1 Nonetheless, the definition of the specific respective realms of the performing and the non-performing arts is debated. Cinema, for example, can be considered a performing art, given that it largely depends on the filming of the performances of actors (although as Mouëllic 2013 argues, improvisation can intervene in different stages of production of a film; see also Mouëllic's contribution in this volume, and Collins 2019). However, it has been argued that performance concerns only those arts that can be experienced *live* (Phelan 1993). Here, to cut a long story short, we assume that the performing arts are those whose performative character can possibly be experienced live, even though we are well aware that the very concept of *liveness* also raises interesting questions (Auslander 2008).

2 According to Ernst Gombrich, in painting "making" comes "before matching, creation before reference" (Gombrich 1984: 81). This view seems to suggest that the most traditional painting practices and techniques are also improvisational in character. In this respect, the practices we discuss in the first section of this chapter can be considered a kind of hyperbolic intensification of this ordinary aspect of pictorial production.

3 See Bertinetto's contribution in this volume for an explanation of this formulation.

4 One of the two authors of this chapter attended a performance of this kind (a painter interacting with a guitarist) as part of a conference (organized in Rome in December 2017) dedicated to the improvised music of the Gruppo di Improvvisazione Nuova Consonanza.

5 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cgBvpjwOGo (accessed November 21, 2020).

6 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gHlTvE-AI3Q (accessed November 21, 2020).

7 Cf. Thürlemann (1992: 69; our translation: A. B. and M. R.):

> As Clement Greenberg critically noted, Rosenberg's analysis does not start with the painterly work of Pollock, but with the photographs and, above all, the film by Hans Namuth. If, for example, the critic defines the screen as 'an arena,' 'in which to act,' this is based on the off-text spoken by Pollock in the film. It was the commentary and the pictures of the gesticulating painter that suggested the formula to Harold Rosenberg: 'The painter has become an actor'.

Greenberg discussed Rosenberg's view of the matter in his essay "'American-Type' Painting" (1955; in Greenberg 1961). As a formalist, Greenberg was exclusively interested in the formal features of the final product, while Rosenberg placed emphasis on the process and the context of painting as human action.

8 Our suspicion is not meant to exclude *a priori* that we *can* recognize, by looking at a painting, some features of its production process. Neurological studies seem to confirm this fact (cf. Freedberg and Gallese 2007). The question formulated here, however, is different: namely, whether, and to what extent, extra-aesthetic knowledge can influence, and in some cases bias, our aesthetic appreciation of a painting.

9 Undeniably, the importance of information regarding the history of an artwork's production goes beyond anecdotal curiosity. Consider *virtuosity* as an artistic property. Knowing, for instance, that a poem made up of hundred perfect Dantesque triplets was improvised, the virtuoso technique that allowed the poet not to miss an accent throughout, say, 100 verses, would be a reason for aesthetically appreciating it; if you discovered that the work was in fact composed and repeatedly revised, your appreciation would change. The same holds, say, in the musical improvisation of counterpoint. The first fugue of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Musical Offering* is magnificent in several respects, including the formal one. Of course, many other of Bach's fugues are similarly magnificent; yet the information that this fugue was indeed improvised surely makes it artistically unique.

10 Of course there are enduring musical artifacts (such as CDs) not originating from a corresponding live performance yet devised in such a way that, like some paintings, they seem to be improvised. Still, paintings, even while they are being made, are *always* enduring objects distinct from the pictorial performances out of which they were produced. By contrast, music – and even improvised music – can be, and before the invention of recording technology always was, both ontologically inseparable from its musical performance and perceived while being performed, without leaving any enduring musical artifact.

11 If the focus of aesthetic appreciation were directed at the artist improvising her work, the specific individual artwork resulting from the performing gesture would be aesthetically irrelevant. Although the vision of Namuth's film explains the dynamic character of paintings produced with the dripping technique, it could be ventured that, in this specific respect, each of Pollock's paintings is worth as much as any other. Each would be just one redundant surplus product of Pollock's true masterpiece: namely, his improvisational acting performance, as immortalized by Namuth's film. But this would obscure, rather than clarify, the reasons why Pollock's artworks are exhibited in museums all over the world.

12 See Bertinetto (2012).

13 See Ch. 5 of Bertinetto (2016c) for the musical case.

14 "By looking attentively at old and smeared walls, or stones and veined marble of various colours, you may fancy that you see in them several compositions, landscapes, battles, figures in quick motion, strange countenances, and dresses, with an infinity of other objects. By these confused lines the inventive genius is excited to new exertions" (Leonardo da Vinci 2014: § CLXIII). Interestingly, Richard Wollheim refers to Leonardo's excerpt (Wollheim 1980: 16 and 218) for supporting his idea of "seeing-in" – the perceptual recognition of figures in surfaces – as the "seeing appropriate to representation" (Wollheim 1980: 212 f.). *Seeing-in* is the twofold perceptual experience entertained by viewers of pictures, who simultaneously grasp the picture's physical basis ("configuration") and the objects presented in the picture ("recognition"). Cozens' method seems to *force* the painter to *see-in* perceptually-imaginatively the results of his uncontrolled intervention and then to respond to it by making explicit what he saw-in,

thereby finishing the painting. It is a sort of (auto-)dialogical process, which, by the way, is a key feature of improvisational practices in performing arts.

15 Henry Angelo (1830) *Reminiscences of Henry Angelo*, vol. 1 London: Henry Colburn and Richard Bentley.

16 The notion of autopoiesis was introduced to explain the organization of living organisms through processes of energy exchanges with the environment: the system produces the components that in turn produce the system, which, thus, feeds back into itself (cf. Maturana and Varela 1980). It has subsequently been applied to other fields, such as social systems (Luhmann 1995), conversations (Sawyer 2003), and performance art (Fischer-Lichte 2008).

17 For recent surveys of the topic, see Giombini (2020) and Bertinetto (forthcoming).

18 As reported by Fertel in the chapter included in this volume novels written intentionally to give the impression of improvised writing are also not a rarity.

19 This quality must be understood in the same sense as Michelangelo's "unfinished" sculptural aesthetics.

20 See Tarasti (2002: 185–6) and Bertinetto's contribution in this volume for the view of improvisation as deictic reference to the situation of its production.

21 "For Monet's idea that all painting of nature must actually be finished 'on the spot' not only demanded a change of habits and a disregard of comfort. It was bound to result in new technical methods. 'Nature' or 'the motif' changes from minute to minute as a cloud passes over the sun or the wind breaks the reflection in the water. The painter who hopes to catch a characteristic aspect has no leisure to mix and match his colours, let alone to apply them in layers on a brown foundation as the old masters had done. He must fix them straight on to his canvas in rapid strokes caring less for detail than for the general effect of the whole. It was this lack of finish, this apparently slapdash approach which literally enraged the critics" (Gombrich 1954: 391).

22 See Campanario (2012) for an introduction to the theme, richly illustrated with images of urban sketches.

23 All quotations are taken from: http://gurneyjourney.blogspot.com/2013/12/interview-on-urban-sketchers.html (accessed November 20, 2020).

24 An exception in this sense is traditional Japanese painting. Famously described by jazz pianist Bill Evans in the liner notes to Miles Davis' masterpiece album *Kind of Blue* (Evans 1959), it can be considered pictorial improvisation, since the painter "must paint on a thin stretched parchment with a special brush and black water paint in such a way that an unnatural or interrupted stroke will destroy the line or break through the parchment. Erasures or changes are impossible." Although the case is intriguing and artistically interesting, the improvisational dimension of this practice is, however, limited. Rather than furthering the author's ability to react to the unexpected, taking it as an opportunity for creative achievements, it seems to require a perfect assimilation of pictorial techniques, which allows the pictorial content, the idea, "to express itself in communication with [the artist's] hands in such a direct way that deliberation cannot interfere." Here the improvisational technique has more the function of excluding the fleeting moment, rather than of capturing it.

25 Hero Lotti, personal communication.

26 See Clarke and Doffman (2017).

27 For a view of this kind, specifically concerning the musical domain, see Benson (2003).

28 For different discussions of the notion and the practice of "free" improvisation, see Matteucci's, Ruta's, Goldoni's, and Arthurs' contributions in this volume.

29 A previous version of this text has been presented at the Aesthetics Permanent Seminar (Aresmur) of the University of Murcia on December 17, 2020. We thank all participants for their feedback and question.

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41
IMPROVISATION IN SCULPTURE

Alice Iacobone

According to a hegemonic tradition, sculpture is an art related to space rather than time. In 1766, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (1836) notoriously clamored for a distinction between spatial and temporal arts, placing sculpture in the former category, and defining it as an art related to the deployment of static objects in space. In Lessing's account, the reception of visual artworks such as paintings and statues has to be intended as an act of simultaneous perception, preventing any possible understanding of sculpture in terms of processuality. The same specificity of the plastic art has been defended in 1940 by Clement Greenberg (1986) and in 1967 by Michael Fried (1995); but stress on the role of spatiality in sculpture can equally be found before then (Babbitt 1910; Giedion-Welcker 1937) and after, right up to recent writings (e.g., Hopkins 2003; Pérez Carreño 2016). As for improvisation, the concept is usually associated with the idea of temporal processes and with artistic genres such as dance, music or theatre. When regarded as merely spatial, sculpture hence appears to have little in common with improvisational practices.

Therefore, is the idea of improvisation in sculpture nothing but a contradiction in terms? This is not necessarily the case. In order to prove so, it is indispensable (a) to reconcile sculpture and temporality, and (b) to provide a definition of improvisation that can apply to "non-performative arts." These preliminary remarks will be the object of the first section of this chapter (§ 1). In what follows, two arguments will be developed: the first one, outlined in the second section (§ 2), will draw on perceptual elements in order to assess the idea that not only the activity of the artist, but also the activity of the recipient, displays improvisational features. The second argument, sketched in the third section (§ 3), will be devoted to the ontology of sculptural artworks: here, I will claim that sculptures themselves *can* be regarded as improvisational entities. Resorting to some case studies, I will finally point out that, after the performative turn that took place in the 1960s, improvisation has become a key concept in understanding many phenomena in the field of contemporary sculpture.

1 Preliminary Remarks

Against a long-standing tradition that describes sculpture as being merely spatial and static, there is a minor line of thought that acknowledges its temporal and performative character. In his *Creative Credo*, for instance, Paul Klee brought up the topic and called for a dynamic approach to visual artworks, among which sculptures must be included. "In Lessing's *Laocoon* […]," he wrote, "a good deal of fuss is made about the difference between temporal and spatial art. But on closer scrutiny the fuss turns out to be mere learned foolishness. For space itself is a temporal concept"

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(Klee 1961: 78). In Klee's account, space and time are intimately enmeshed with one another by reason of movement (the line, for instance, becomes here "a kind of 'performance' of [the] point," Sztabińska 2015: 132). In a similar fashion, in 1956 the Italian art critic Cesare Brandi argued for the merging of temporality and spatiality within plastic artworks (Brandi 1992: 76–7): sculptures, Brandi claimed, possess a "rhythm" that is both temporal and spatial. These kinds of arguments do not require the complete dismissal of the role of space for plastic arts: on the contrary, there are theoretical accounts in which the deployment of the artwork is regarded as the temporal shaping of space (Recht 2009) or even as the production of space itself. It is the case in some late writings by Martin Heidegger (1964 and 1969): through the peculiar pages of *Die Kunst und der Raum* the German philosopher stressed the relation between plastic arts and spatiality by focusing more on sculptures' capability of establishing new spatial dimensions (*das Räumen*) rather than on mere fixed space (*der Raum*).

To be sure, Lessing did not dismiss the question of sculpture's temporality *tout court*; rather, he argued for statues to depict a frozen instant within a narrative and logical sequence of gestures. Such a punctual moment, according to Lessing, would be taken in at a glance. However, not only is the processuality of perception physiologically conflicting with the thesis of the fixed gaze (Wagner 2016), but theories such as Lessing's also encompass a perspective in which art is unable to bring novelty into being. The artwork is, thus, placed within a linear development of time in which the emergence of unexpected elements finds no room. In contrast to this view, Rosalind Krauss turned her attention to the capability of sculpture to enter a dimension of time in which artist, artwork and recipient are shaped through their mutual interaction. Focusing on Auguste Rodin's art pieces, Krauss showed that their temporality is transformative and productive: it is a temporality in which "meaning does not precede experience but occurs in the process of experience itself" (Krauss 1977: 30). This temporality, in which there is no narrative script nor logical sequence to follow, is the one of improvisation.

By drawing on these theories, sculpture can prove itself to be much more dynamic than traditionally envisioned, involving a temporality that relies both on the motility of the aesthetic experience and of perception in general – so that a sculpture literally *appears* to the recipient (Potts 2021: 66–9) – and on the ontological properties belonging to the artworks themselves, which are "more like happenings than objects" (Torsen 2021: 118). These two arguments (the perceptual and the ontological one) will provide the basis for our claim, i.e., that plastic art may involve improvisation, and they will be developed, respectively, in the second and third sections of the present chapter.

Before addressing those questions, however, it is necessary to provide a clear-cut definition of the concept of improvisation in order to assess whether it might actually find fruitful application within the domain of plastic arts. Improvisation in general may be defined as an aesthetic category that enables us to conceive the ontological coincidence of invention and performance within the artistic entity (Bertinetto 2016: II.2): to a certain degree, in improvisation there is no gap between the process of making and the resulting product. It is no surprise, then, that most accounts based on this concept and most discussions about it concern the so-called performative arts: mainly music (e.g., Brinkmann 1979; Alperson 1984), dance (Boissière and Kintzler 2006) and theater (Drinko 2013).

Far from being unrelated to the topic at stake here, the debate on improvisation in the performative arts provides us with useful theoretical tools that could apply to improvisation in sculpture. In the first place, it is important to note that the improvised event, although highly spontaneous, should not be intended as something that occurs *ex nihilo*: rather, it should be regarded as emerging from a background and as strongly rooted in it (Bertinetto 2009: 152; Bertinetto 2016: II.6). Such background consists in traditions, practical constraints or even unwitting habits settled in bodily and collective memory; however (and this is the second point), the background itself is affected by the improvised performance, which retroactively acts on it. The context from which

the improvisational art piece emerges is, in turn, shaped by the artwork: that is to say, the performer's expertise is the precondition of the performance, but the performance in turn enhances such expertise; thus, the violation of current norms does not necessarily entail failure, as it can actually establish new norms and cause the production of brand-new normativity (Bertram 2010). Improvisation regulates itself retroactively, following an autopoietic pattern (Bertinetto 2014a) that closely recalls the "autopoietic feedback loop" to which Erika Fischer-Lichte brought attention in characterizing her "aesthetics of performativity" (Fischer-Lichte 2008). By drawing on the notion of autopoiesis, which was firstly introduced in biology in order to refer to living systems' self-production (Maturana and Varela 1980), Fischer-Lichte examines the ways in which a theater piece produces itself by means of the transformative loop of actions, reactions and retroactions performed both by actors and audience. In this dynamic, the producer is at the same time the product: under this respect, autopoiesis may be regarded as an improvisational trend – or, conversely, improvisation could be described as autopoietic (Bertinetto 2009: 155–7). However, Fischer-Lichte exclusively takes into account examples from the theatre domain, including performances and happenings: in so doing, she ties the performative and improvisational capacity to living entities, leaving out visual artworks such as sculptures because they are usually made of inorganic, inert matter. In other words, in Fischer-Lichte's account, living beings are the only ones entitled to actual and effective presence (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 96), whereas inorganic entities such as sculptures can, at best, merely aspire to achieve a condition defined by the "weak concept of presence" (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 94). This is why, although providing the discussion with useful theoretical tools, Fischer-Lichte is not able to account for the performativity and the improvisational qualities of plastic arts, nor does she want to do so.

Not only are improvisational practices closely tied to animation and life, the ontology of improvisation in performing arts also differs from the one concerning non-performing arts because of the existence, in the latter, of a final, non-ephemeral artwork (Bertinetto 2014b and 2018). Nevertheless, the conceptual framework regarding improvisation in performative arts could apply to sculpture, provided that one adopts an aesthetic perspective in which even material artworks are intended more as processual events rather than as static objects. Such a process-centered aesthetics has been outlined by Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson, notably in his *Aesthetics. Theory of Formativity*, first published in 1954. According to Pareyson, all artistic activities have to be regarded in terms of "formativity," which is defined as "a kind of making that, while taking place, makes up its own way of making" (Pareyson 1960: 6, my trans. A. I.). The striking similarity between formativity and improvisation (which did not go unnoticed: Bertinetto 2009; Valgenti, this volume) results from Pareyson's thesis according to which the artwork's *forma formans* (forming form) never ceases to be at work within the *forma formata* (formed form) of the artwork itself: "the form is the very process" (Pareyson 1960: 80, my trans. A. I.). Here, the essence of the work of art relies on its activity and practical aspects turn out to be ontological traits, resulting in an effectualist ontology in which the artwork's being *is* its own *energeia*. Being both the outcome and the source of a "formative making," the artistic product is non-detachable from the process of its production; even statues prove to be autopoietic entities. This results also from Pareyson's resorting to a biological metaphor. Following Goethe's tradition (Pareyson 2003), while cultivating a dialogue with contemporary thought (Gilson 1958: 196–212; Pareyson 1966: 57–69), the Italian philosopher claims that artworks shall be regarded as organisms (Pareyson 1960: 62), which develop themselves following a pattern based on concrescence or, as pointed out, on autopoiesis. Thereby, some sort of "life" pertains to sculpture as well, and improvisation turns out to be consistent with poietic production.

What could be the perks of embracing such somewhat counterintuitive account? The main advantage of this position lies in the capability of the improvisational model to account for art as a means of production rather than reproduction. That is to say, improvisation rejects an

understanding of art in terms of *mimesis* or of representation: improvisations do not aim at reproducing or manifesting an already extant entity; on the contrary, they are mainly self-referential. In this way, improvisation exemplifies the artworks' self-referential constitution (see Bertram 2014) – which is the same constitution that living beings display.

2 Production and Appreciation as Improvisational Practices

2.1 Continuity between the Sculptor's Gesture and the Appreciator's Perception

The sculptural gesture is always improvisational *in some respect*: as the sculptor confronts the chosen matter, she cannot help but partially invent an innovative strategy to approach it. Even if mediated by skills and expertise, the encounter with a specific matter is always singular and it does not fully respond to the artist's expectations. The struggle in this confrontation is particularly evident in *non finito* sculptures, from Michelangelo to Rodin, as one can still appreciate handprints and traces on their surfaces and recall the sculptor's gesture. Following the idea of a minimal improvisation always required in the production of sculptures, one can argue for improvisational elements in reception practices as well.

Pareyson's theory of formativity might again come in handy here. According to him, both production and reception of the artwork are active processes; moreover, there is a continuity between the two, as they are qualitatively equivalent. In Pareyson's account, the only way to access any kind of artwork is to perform it: "'visualization' is no less of a performance than 'sonorization'" (Pareyson 1960: 190, my trans. A. I.). Being the outcome of the formative activity of the artist, the artwork should be considered by the recipient as a dynamic entity rather than in terms of a static object: as Pareyson clearly states, "the performance of the beholder carries on the performance of the artist" (Pareyson 1960: 192, my trans. A. I.). According to this thesis, which Pareyson outlines also referring to Goethe's dictum "*genießen ist nachschaffen*" ("enjoying is recreating," quoted in Pareyson 1974: 106, my trans. A. I.), the recipient has to witness the unfolding of the very process of formation, which is embedded in the artwork (Pareyson 1960: 215). In this sense, the improvisational gesture of the artist, who formatively invented the way of performing as the artistic performance went along, is retraced and restored by the perceptive activity of the recipient. The performance of the recipient is itself formative: the encounter with the artwork displays a dynamic in which invention and execution take place at the same time, as one perceives the formational activity of the *forma formans* at work within the *forma formata*. According to Pareyson, this results in the perception of the life of the artwork itself, which keeps living insofar as its formative process is never really over. The artwork is not understood as an inanimate body; rather, it is "a living existence" (Pareyson 1960: 201, my trans. A. I.). Being "alive," the work of art calls for a reception that resembles an encounter.

If there is an improvisational aspect in perception in general (Clark 2016), this can be said of the perception of artworks in an even proper sense, because works of art are not objects with static properties, but, rather, they elicit interactions in which recipients (and artists) modify themselves and their extra-artistic practices (Bertram 2014). At this level, a degree of improvisation pertains to every artwork, and to sculptures among them, because the people who interact with them cannot help but engage in an improvisational, productive practice.

2.2 Touch and Haptic Vision

Circling back to the specificity of plastic arts, the relationship between people and a sculpture should also be regarded as an "encounter" because sculptures are three-dimensional bodies, and they inhabit the very same space in which we live too: here, the boundaries between art and life can become blurred. Encouraging the idea of physical contact, sculptures address touch and elicit

embodied experiences. This simple insight underlies a whole line of thought that may help us develop a perspective in which the relationship to plastic artworks is intended as an improvisational activity. This touch-centered approach to sculpture, however, takes two slightly different directions (D'Angelo 2003: 111–4). On the one hand, there are theories that stress the role of *actual touch*, arguing that, if the appreciator wants to receive an artwork properly, she necessarily has to interact with it by means of hands and skin; on the other hand, there is a tradition in which touch is intended in a broader meaning (namely in a *synesthetic sense*), so that even forms of *haptic vision* are envisaged as a legitimate reception of sculptures through touch.

The strict necessity of actually touching plastic artworks was strongly defended mid-19th century by Robert Zimmerman (1865); the point was then investigated in 1911, when Richard Hohenemser published an article titled *Wendet sich die Plastik an den Tastsinn?* (Hohenemser 1911). To this very explicit question ("is sculpture addressed to touch?") the author resolutely answers that yes, it is. Drawing on the experience of visually-impaired recipients, Hohenemser claims that touch does elicit aesthetic experience; however, he fails to account for the necessity of perceiving sculptures solely through touch (D'Angelo 2003: 113). More convincingly, in the 1950s Herbert Read (1956) argued for touch to be the only licit mean of knowledge in the plastic art's field. Sculptors do touch the statues they produce; therefore, according to Read, the recipient should be allowed to perceive them by means of their hands as well: in this account, the specificity of each different art is defined by referring to the supposedly matching sense. An increasing attention for the dimension of tactility can be found within artistic researches as well. Let us think, for instance, of Constantin Brancusi's *Sculpture for the Blind* (see Barassi 2014), or of the so-called "*sculpture à toucher*" exhibited in 1916 in New York by Dada artist Miss Clifford-Williams (Mango 2015: 13). Nowadays, the attention for the theme of touch in sculpture has been object of artistic research such as the one carried out by Liane Lang, who devoted to this topic her series *Casts* (2006/2007) and *Spectres* (2008). However, from the avant-garde period up to present days, the role of the touching hand in artworks' appreciation has been more and more enhanced within the field of "performative arts" too: from theatre (e.g., Richard Schechner's "caress scene" in *Dionysus in 69*) to dance (Virgilio Sieni's *Danza cieca*, or Felix Ruckert's *Hautnah* and *Secret service*). The stress on touch appears, therefore, to belong more to a general *performative turn* in the arts that explicitly began in the 1960s (see Mersch, this volume). In this context, reception is no longer conceived as passive, static, disinterested contemplation, but rather as activity and participation: the eye, therefore, seems to lose its privilege in favor of a deeper involvement of the hand. Moreover, sculpture is not *per se* the art of touch, as plastic artworks are usually perceived through sight as well: hence Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's need to create the brand-new artistic genre of "Tactilism" (1921), whose tactile tables explicitly addressed the hand and cannot be regarded as sculptures (Marinetti 2015: 57). So, even though these arguments are very relevant and even though neurosciences confirm that accessing plastic artworks through actual touch can indeed provide a more valuable experience of them (Gallace and Spence 2014), the second line of thought appears to be more fruitful for the purposes of this chapter. That is to say, theories based on hapticity may find a broader application and could therefore provide a better tool in order to claim the improvisational character of our relationship with sculptures in general, i.e., with sculpture as an artistic genre.

This second line of thought can be traced back to Johann Gottfried Herder and his famous *Plastik*. First written in 1768–70 and then published in a revised, expanded version in 1778, Herder's text specifically addresses sculpture and outlines an "aesthetics of touch" (Zuckert 2009: 291) whose theses are strikingly innovative if considered in the context of the standard 18th-century perspective. Against an orthodox background in which appreciation was reduced to visual contemplation and disinterestedness (Zuckert 2009: 291–4), Herder develops an aesthetics of embodiment that entails physical involvement with the artwork, where such involvement is of course achieved through touch. Despite some ambivalence (see Pinotti 2009), touch is mainly intended

by Herder not in terms of actual tactility but rather as an "imaginative touch" (Zuckert 2009: 287) performed by the eye. What is at stake here is, then, "the eye that […] touches in the same way as the hand" (Herder 2002: 51). In Herder's account, this tactile vision is closely tied to movement: the relation to the artwork is, thus, regarded as kinaesthetic, leading the way to the possibility of artist and beholder's transformation through their contact with the sculpture.

More than one century later, sculptor and art theorist Adolf von Hildebrand collected Herder's legacy in *The Problem of Form in Painting and Sculpture*. In this book, published in 1893 and then again, for the third time, in a revised version dated 1903, Hildebrand bases his argument on Hermann von Helmholtz's theories of vision (see Scrivano 1996). Being physiologically accurate, Hildebrand's theory results in a "logic of the body" (Pinotti and Scrivano 2001: 16, my trans. A. I.) in which a sharp distinction between viewing an object from a distance and viewing it from nearby is made, by reason of the different mechanisms of eye accommodation involved in the two situations. Hildebrand ties nearby vision to movement, and he argues that alleged static artworks, such as statues, are temporally perceived. Here, again, touch is intended in the sense of kinetic vision – which finds confirmation in neuroscientific research that shows how "the tactile and motor areas of the brain are especially heavily connected" (Gallace and Spence 2014: 118). The reception of a sculpture is strongly linked to the sensorimotor system because the work of art is the outcome of a making that is ultimately motion, on one hand, and, on the other, because the sculpture challenges its viewer, who in turn must perform the movement of virtually "disassembling and reassembling" the image of the artwork itself (Pinotti and Scrivano 2001: 15–6, my trans. A. I.). The sculpture's being can be conceived as its efficacy, because the work of art expresses the causes of its production while being able to produce its own effects (Pinotti and Scrivano 2001: 31).

After Hildebrand, the tradition of participative appreciation by means of haptic vision has been carried on by a number of authors – it would be sufficient to mention Alois Riegl, Heinrich Wölfflin and Bernard Berenson, who have provided Hildebrand's classification of vision mechanisms with a diachronic perspective.[1] However, what shall be retained from Herder and Hildebrand's positions is the idea of an embodied approach to sculptures, in which one cannot but engage in a physical confrontation that displays an improvisational character.

2.3 The Sculptor's Agency and the Sculpture's Life

Hildebrand's arguments have some similarities with more recent theories, for instance with some anthropological accounts focused on the phenomenon of artworks' agency. In Alfred Gell's *Art and Agency* material artworks such as paintings and sculptures display a twofold agency, in that they have to be regarded as being both the outcome and the source of practical activities. Focusing now on the "input side" (Currie 2012: 121) of such artworks' agency – where works of art show themselves as effects (namely as the upshot of the artist's activity) – rather than on the "output side" – in which artworks act as social agents and are conceivable as genuine causes – one could claim that when considering an artwork, the viewer does not merely see an object with a certain shape and color, but she rather sees the trace of the activity of another human being. This is precisely the cognitive operation that Gell describes as abduction of agency: the beholder infers the gesture performed by the artist by the mere sight of the art object, because such artifact indexes its own origins. As Gell states, "Every artefact is a 'performance' in that it motivates the abduction of its coming-into-being in the world. […] [The artwork] is a congealed residue of performance and agency in object-form" (Gell 1998: 67–8). Gell, however, is more interested in the role of artworks as social agents and on the "output side" of artistic agency (to which I will return in the next section), whereas Gregory Currie has stressed and investigated the status of artworks as expressive of the artist's activity (Currie 2012: 120). Currie argues for a pre-theoretical, non-propositional and bodily-based engagement with the artwork; such engagement occurs by reason of an affinity of

bodily disposition. When approaching an artwork, the brushstrokes, the marks and in general all those elements that let the viewer abduct the formative process undertaken by the material give rise to a "strong bodily sense of artifactuality of the object and to a representation of its manner of making" (Currie 2012: 120). Currie finds justification for his argument in neurosciences: this "bodily resonance" (Currie 2012: 119) is explained by the Italian neuroscientist Vittorio Gallese in terms of inter-corporeity or "embodied simulation" (Freedberg and Gallese 2007a, 2007b). That is to say, not only does the mirroring mechanism allow the viewer to reconstruct the process of the production of the artwork, but it also makes her retrace such process by virtually simulating it at a neural level. Nevertheless, I must now add, this retracing seems to be better understood when one does not reduce it to the accurate repetition of the artist's gesture: on the contrary, the recipient appears to restore the maker's performance just in order to carry it on, extending it in unexpected directions. The performance of the appreciator is, thus, as creative as the artist's one, and it may be regarded as a practice of improvisation in that it produces unforeseen effects – as the Latin meaning of *improvisus*, "not fore-seen" (Bertinetto 2018) reminds us.

Let us now consider the *experiences* of people involved in scenarios in which artworks exert agency upon human beings (on artworks' capability to do so see *infra*, § 3.1). Such experiences, I claim, represent a group of phenomena that fits in the category of improvisational practices related to sculpture's appreciation and production.

What happens when a material artwork – say, a statue – exerts agency upon its beholder? According to Caroline van Eck (2010 and 2015), in such cases the person experiences the statue as being alive. This is the so-called "living presence response" phenomenon, that refers to those "responses based on the attribution of life and lifelike powers to objects" (Freedberg 1989: 43). What is at issue is the capacity manifested by certain supposedly inert artifacts to elicit physical, emotional and cognitive reactions that are typically provoked only by living beings. As underlined by van Eck (2010: 646), the important point is that this kind of engagement does not derive from a sort of ontological or cognitive mistake (nor is it a case of agalmatophilia). This is to say, the appreciator does not believe that the artwork has acquired biological liveliness,[2] yet she cannot avoid responding to the artwork with such "inappropriate" responses precisely because she *experiences* the power of the artwork towards her: she experiences the statue's "inorganic life."

The phenomenon is not new: a variety of "living presence responses" triggered by plastic artworks has been recorded already among ancient Greeks, who had no trouble in acknowledging a living force within statues (Tarn Steiner 2001; Pugliara 2002). Viable examples of this phenomenon are provided by the crafts of Hephaestus and Daedalus, but the most famous case is, indeed, represented in the myth of Pygmalion and Galatea, which portrays a sculptor who falls in love with the statue he had previously carved. The tale, notably well known in the Roman version collected in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, elicited a strong reaction in a wide range of artists and writers. Between the 18th and the 19th century, in particular, the theme of statues' animation became a *topos* addressed by many authors – from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Honoré de Balzac, Friedrich Schiller and E. T. A. Hoffmann. Placed in this context, Herder's text (the full title of which, *Sculpture. Some Observations on Shape and Form from Pygmalion's Creative Dream*, explicitly refers to this set of questions) can provide valuable insights. The theme of the animation of statues – or, more accurately, of their vivification *through touch* (Paraskos 2014) – is indeed present in Herder's account. Herder refers to sculptures in terms of "living forms" (Herder 2002: 65) and even acknowledges the possibility of sexual arousal when confronted by them (see Zuckert 2009: 294). If Fischer-Lichte, as previously mentioned, makes a sharp distinction between living subjects and inanimate, biologically inert objects, claiming that only the former are actually "present," Herder, on the contrary, is able to pinpoint a "stark presence" of sculptures as well: "A sculpture […] can embrace me," he claims, "it can become my friend and companion: it is *present, it is there*" (Herder 2002: 45). The statue, otherwise said, is alive – though in a non-biological sense.

Herder's aesthetics, however, is – so to speak – anthropocentric: as Rachel Zuckert highlights, "sculpture is, on Herder's view, preeminently an experience of, by, and for humans as embodied creatures" (Zuckert 2009: 294), meaning that Herder primarily refers to statues depicting human beings and that the vivification of sculpture can be achieved by means of a "transposition" of ourselves into the artwork. Such vivification based on the projection of one's own humanity into the statue representing a human being, however, does not have to be the only possible scenario. This becomes evident when living presence responses are elicited by abstract artworks (van Eck 2010: 643), proving that experiencing the life of a sculpture is possible even when the artwork is not figurative. Living presence responses, then, are not provoked by the represented object (the artwork's "content"), but rather by the artwork itself and its own materiality.

Being perceived as alive, the statue endorses an interaction with its makers and its perceivers that could be regarded as a full-fledged encounter between subjects. The traits of such relation are, of course, not fully predictable; its features and its effects emerge as the encounter itself goes on: the performance is inventive, it brings novelty into being. Conceived in this way, plastic production and reception turn out to be artistic experiences in which human beings are transformed and modified – "touched," one may say – by sculptures: they are practices that always display a degree of improvisation, however small.

3 Sculpture as Improvisational Entity

3.1 Agentive Subjectivity

If the sculptor can act in an improvised manner, and if it is possible to claim, as I have tried to do, that such improvisational capacity pertains also to the recipient's perception, it is more difficult to argue, instead, for the improvisational ability of the sculpted object itself, as this claim may appear more counterintuitive. A statue can hardly be imagined as capable of improvisation; however, this is precisely the claim I would like to put forward.

In order to argue for sculptures' improvisational activity, it is necessary to assess whether plastic artworks can be seen as "agents" (i.e., as endowed with agency). The debate on material agency, that investigates the active capacity displayed by some objects with which we share our everyday life, provides valuable tools for such purpose. The point at issue, here, is the "output side" of agency as pinpointed by Gell: under certain circumstances, artworks can exert agency and be the source of actions; they can behave like social agents and they can even exhibit personhood (Gell 1998: 17–8). What are, though, the conditions to fulfill? According to Gell, agency is defined by intentionality: "whenever an event is believed to happen because of an 'intention' lodged in the person or thing which initiates the causal sequence, that is an instance of 'agency'" (Gell 1998: 17). Gell is, of course, aware that objects such as sculptures do not have *stricto sensu* intentions, and he solves the problem by specifying that artworks are actually *mediating* agency rather than acting according to their own intentionality. In order to satisfy the intentionality condition, Gell introduces a categorical distinction between "primary" and "secondary" agents: the former are intentional beings, whereas the latter are mere things, artifacts, "through which primary agents distribute their agency in the causal milieu, and thus render their agency effective" (Gell 1998: 20). Gell, then, although succeeding in detecting the features of the topic, fails to provide a good explanation of artworks' agency, because such agency is ultimately traced back to a human subject acting in their vicinity (Leach 2007). Artworks, far from being genuine agents, are here reduced to mere "social parrots" (Morphy 2009: 8).

The problem detected by Gell remains: are artworks capable of actions of their own? According to the art historian Horst Bredekamp, we usually assume that they are not because of the rationalistic, Western interdiction, based on Enlightenment thought, of acknowledging inorganic matter's

subjectivity and life (Bredekamp 2018: 8). Bredekamp, on the contrary, aims at accounting for the "duality in the work of art as simultaneously inorganic and yet infused with a 'life' of its own" (Bredekamp 2018: 9). Drawing on the tradition of *imagenes agentes*, he accounts for the life and activity of artworks by means of an intrinsic *energeia* that qualifies them (Bredekamp 2018: 282): art objects, and sculptures among them, are not "representation of" some other entity (Vercellone 2015: XVIII). They are, rather, self-referential subjects; they do not stand for reality: they are a part of it, and they participate in its production (Bredekamp 2018: 283). This idea of activity, however, does not need to be intended as necessarily tied to movement. One can also argue, as David Getsy recently did, for the performativity of sculpture by means of its unresponsiveness (Getsy 2014: 8): a sculpture's acts of resistance have to be understood as actions, or even reactions, that produce their own effects. In this sense, there are cases in which a sculpture is "acting by not moving" (Getsy 2014: 10).

Here, the ontological question about the very nature of the work of art is led back to an effectualist consideration, so that the artwork *is* what it *does*. In the context of an ontology of this kind, it gets easier to argue for the improvisational capacity of plastic artworks, as they can be described as autopoietic entities that, by interacting with human beings and the environment, are able to modify themselves as well as their milieu. The network of actions and feedbacks in which human beings and plastic artworks are entangled can cause unpredictable and not codifiable effects that are fully understandable only if one regards them as part of an improvisational event.

If an improvisational capacity could pertain to all sculptures by reason of their ontological role within an agency network, it is also true that nowadays sculpture often exhibits more explicit event-like traits. The reflection on what one may call "a performative turn in the plastic arts" – which I will turn to in the following paragraph – leads to a framework where the improvisation performed by plastic artworks results more and more evident. I cannot but mention that my argument reflects the one made by Umberto Eco in *The Open Work*. According to Eco, there are "two kinds of openness" of artworks (Eco 1989: 39): on a first, broader level, all artworks are open by means of the continuity of production and reception (a thesis that Eco inherits from Pareyson). "The openness of a work of art is the very condition of aesthetic pleasure" (Eco 1989: 39), he claims, because the appreciator cannot approach the artwork without performing it. On a second, narrower level, Eco claims that the 20th century has witnessed the rise of a "poetics of the open work" (Eco 1989: 1) – the subcategory of which is the "poetics of the work in movement" (Eco 1989: 14) – in which openness becomes the very program of the artistic practices, paving the way to a more explicit participation of the appreciator (and to a more evident agency displayed by the artwork). Whereas the broader, ontological level has been the object of my analysis in the first part of this section, the second level (the one of contingent poetics) is what I aim to investigate next.

3.2 The Performative Turn in the Plastic Arts

In retracing a possible history of such performative turn in the plastic arts, the roots of contemporary "performative sculptures" can be certainly spotted in some features of the avant-garde movements, insofar as performance art is, as brilliantly stated by RoseLee Goldberg (2001: 7), "Avant-garde's Avant-garde." Some elements, however, can be traced even further back, up to certain innovations already developed by Auguste Rodin in the second half of the 19th century. Though centered on the human figure, Rodin's sculptures cannot be intended in representational terms, as they are rather self-referential, "plastic living organisms" (Poli 2006: 8) – a point that Rainer Maria Rilke (1903) did not fail to notice in his writings on the French sculptor. Rodin's artworks are deeply entangled with the reality they inhabit; a fact that becomes particularly clear by considering his treatment of the pedestal, whose role is radically called into question. At the *Salon* of 1889, for instance, Rodin exhibited his *Eve* (realized in 1881) with a buried basement: in

this way the statue rested her feet on the same ground the visitors did. Rodin's statues are enmeshed with the recipient's environment, in a way that challenges the very distinction between art and life.

Among the antecedents of the performative turn in plastic arts, a prominent role is played by Futurism. Umberto Boccioni's sculptures, as well as his *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* (1912), enhance the importance of dynamism in plastic arts. This result is achieved by means of a deep sensibility towards modern themes (speed, industrial progress, machines), as well as through formal solutions that aim at obtaining dynamic effects without abandoning plastic consistency and organicity. In the same years, Cubism was developing a dynamic conception of sculpture as well; under this respect, however, Futurism was more radical in that it regarded movement in terms of an intrinsic property of the artistic object. As Francesco Poli explains, the Cubist composition "triggers a dynamic vision of the object, [therefore dynamism] is mainly placed in the observer's looking, whereas Boccioni (tied to a romantic, idealistic aesthetics in which movement coincides with life) aimed at realizing organically 'living' artworks" (Poli 2006: 42, my trans. A. I.). Boccioni's plastic dynamism is intended not solely in relation to the human figure but also to objects, suffice it to mention *Development of a Bottle in Space* (1913): "for Boccioni nothing was static or inanimate" (Elsen 1974: 54). In his *Manifesto* Boccioni also introduces the idea of inserting mechanical devices into the artwork with the purpose of animating the object with actual movement: he can be considered, then, the first theorist of Kinetic sculpture (Poli 2006: 43).

Although theorizing it, Boccioni did not insert actual movement into his own works. The first properly intended kinetic sculpture can be identified, rather, as Marcel Duchamp's *Bicycle Wheel* (1913). Besides Dada, Constructivist artists such as Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner can be counted among the pioneers of Kinetic art too. In their *Realist Manifesto*, dated 1920, they "affirm a new element in plastic arts: the kinetic rhythms, which are essential forms of our perception of real time" (Gabo and Pevsner 2003: 299). Such theories and practices, developed also by László Moholy-Nagy, represent the starting point of a number of works realized in the 1930s (as it is the case for the movement Abstraction-Création) and then in the 1950s and 1960s in the field of Kinetic and Optical Art.

Generally speaking, from the 1960s onward, one can observe a "theatralization" of sculpture, which becomes more and more able to move and perform like an independent agent. It is the case, for instance, with Len Lye's *Tangibles*, exhibited at MoMA in 1961. In 1967 this situation was condemned by modernist art theorist Michael Fried: in defense of the medium specificity, he argued that "the survival of the arts has come increasingly to depend on their ability to defeat theater" (Fried 1995: 139). A different view on the topic was expressed in 1977 by Krauss (1977: 201–42), who cherished such tendency in that it encourages a more interactive approach to sculptures.

One of the characteristics of the performative turn is that the rise of new artistic genres (such as *happenings* and Performance Art) is associated with a global revision of traditional aesthetic categories. Viewers can become actors, actors can be used as objects, different media can be merged together in hybrid artworks. This fact has been highlighted by Fischer-Lichte (2008: 169–74), who regards the abolition of rigid categories as one of the defining traits of performativity as a concept. This applies to sculpture as well: at a certain point – whether modernists like it or not – it becomes impossible to make a sharp distinction between sculpture and other genres such as Installation Art (see Landgraf, this volume; Caldarola, this volume), Body Art and Performance Art. It suffices to mention the "living sculptures" realized, in different fashions, by Piero Manzoni (*Sculture viventi*, 1961), Gilbert & George (*Our New Sculpture*, or *Singing Sculpture*, 1969), Klaus Rinke and Monika Baumgartl (*Primary Demonstrations*, 1970) or Niki de Saint Phalle's performances named *Shootings*, addressed in one occasion against a plaster cast of the *Venus de Milo* (May 4, 1962). Ultimately, what these artistic pieces show is a radical intermingling of art and life, the extreme outcomes of which can be pinpointed in the field of Bio-Art, that envisages the production of semi-living

sculptures (Catts and Zurr 2002) or the possibility of "sculpting new proteins" (Kac 2007: 171–3), leading to the collapse of the traditional boundaries between art and life, fiction and reality.

3.3 A Case Study: Theo Jansen's Strandbeests

Let us now consider a case study from the field of contemporary Kinetic Art: Theo Jansen's *Strandbeests* (1991–present). Made of yellow PVC pipes, Jansen's "beach animals" are massive sculptures that are able to move thanks to wind propulsion (Figure 41.1).[3]

Jansen's artistic praxis relies on engineering knowledge; however, whereas engineers – Jansen (2008: 27) stated – would have first designed and then assembled the "beach beasts," following a strategy in which invention precedes execution, Jansen adopts a very different method. In his artistic practice, new ideas and possibilities emerge during the very process of the making, restrictions reveal new opportunities; in short, invention is intrinsic to the productive performance (Jansen 2008: 27). Jansen proceeds in a "formative" way, as Pareyson would have said; his practice involves a high degree of improvisation in that there is no previous script to follow: what occurs is an accidental, contingent evolution. For Jansen, what the artistic activity brings to the artist is precisely "the sheer pleasure of evolving and making" (Jansen 2008: 27): the pleasure of improvising on the basis of the elements that are already available.

Jansen refers to the *Strandbeests* as full-fledged new forms of life, some of which became extinct while others keep evolving both morphologically and functionally. With regards to nutrition, his self-moving sculptures get their energy from wind rather than from food. Not only are they able to store such energy and keep moving in case of a lack of wind, they also respond to the environment, turning away from the water of the sea as well as from dry sand, and they are becoming more and more able to survive on their own. As for defense and reproduction, many strategies are available: in some cases, "they get their camouflage from sand clinging to the adhesive tape (*Animaris Sabulosa*), [in others] they reproduce by cannibalism (*Animaris Geneticus*)" (Jansen 2008: 27). Designed more according to biomorphic than depictive criteria, Jansen's sculptures have the appearance of gigantic living creatures – which they actually are, insofar as we can conceive an "artificial" life (Langton 1996) and apply the concept to the *Strandbeests* series (which has already been done: see Jansen 2008: 24; Kim et al. 2014: 1280 f.).

Figure 41.1 An example from Theo Jansen's *Strandbeests* series. Photo by Robbert van den Beld, The Hague, September 2014.

Jansen's improvising sculptures represent one of the consequent outcomes of some well-known tendencies in plastic arts. Biomorphism, for instance, can be traced back to Jean Arp's figures, animated by a generative force that eludes identification with any existing living entity. "I have tried to make the forms grow," Arp declared; "I wish my work had found its place in the woods, on the mountains, in the wild" (quoted in Poli 2006: 54–6, my trans. A. I.). The *Strandbeests*, meant to live on Dutch beaches, make Arp's wish come true. But Jansen's artworks are not the first case of Kinetic sculpture meeting non-imitative biomorphism; a possible antecedent of this can be found in Alexander Calder's mobiles. The point becomes evident in Jean-Paul Sartre's statements:

> Calder usually does not imitate, and I know of no art which is less deceitful than his. […] His mobiles signify nothing, refer to nothing but themselves: they *are*, that is all. […] Calder establishes a general destiny of motion for each mobile, then he leaves it on its own. It is the time of day, the sun, the heat, the wind which calls each individual dance.
>
> *(Sartre 1947)*

The same could be said in an even more proper sense of Jansen's beach beasts, whose features are non-mimetic and whose existence is entirely self-referential. Although depending on a "general destiny of motion" (i.e., the concrete range of movements they are able to perform) the *Strandbeests* move autonomously, adapting to the environment and to the circumstances; their behavior can be regarded as an autopoietic improvisation. Not only are the *Strandbeests* going through a constant metamorphic evolution, they are also shaping the landscape, as the main activity they explicitly undertake consists in creating dunes to fight the rising sea levels. This, of course, does not come without a number of other unpredictable effects. Sculptures such as the *Strandbeests* series reveal a tight correspondence between inner becoming and capacity of transforming the surrounding environment, by virtue of the improvisational dynamics they are involved with.

4 Conclusion

Common sense, as well as many credited theories, describe sculpture as static and inert. In contrast to such position, I have tried to point out that the understanding of plastic artworks could benefit from a dynamic account in which improvisation plays a central role. On a first, more general level, improvisation pertains to sculptures in that they are constitutively entangled in the human network: both production and reception require a level of improvisational skills in order to "perform" the sculpture itself. On a narrower, more specific level, sculptures can furthermore become the very subjects of improvisational performances, as a large part of contemporary plastic art reveals. To acknowledge the role of improvisation in sculpture does not entail an improper broadening of the concept of improvisation, up to losing its heuristic value; rather, it means regarding sculptures no longer as static objects with fixed properties, but as dynamic, interacting entities in relation to which the unexpected can occur.

Related Topics

Caldarola, E. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Installation Art."
Landgraf, E. (This Volume) "Installed Improvisation: The Case of Erwin Redl."
Mersch, D. (This Volume) "Performance Art and Improvisation."
Valgenti, R. T. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Ontology of Formativity."

Notes

1 A "hand of the eye" ("*main de l'œil*," Valéry 1957–1961: 435) is also present in Paul Valéry's *Cahiers*; but the concept of "hapticity" has been object of investigation in a broad number of texts, from Aby Warburg's to Gilles Deleuze's – just to mention some.

2 This way of dismissing the problem resembles the way in which Colin Radford and Michael Weston (Radford and Weston 1975), although formulating the paradox of fiction, dismiss it by claiming for the emotional responses to fictional literary artworks to be irrational. Actually, living presence responses could profitably be seen as cases of the paradox of fiction itself, transposed onto visual arts. On this see Gaiger (2011: 372).

3 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U0QHkpOmrUo&ab_channel=TEDxDelft (accessed November 2, 2020).

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42

IMPROVISATION AND ARTISTIC PHOTOGRAPHY

Alessandro Bertinetto

1 Introduction

This chapter aims at exploring a new field in aesthetics: improvisation in photography. As I will suggest, reflecting on the link between improvisation and photography contributes not only to seeing "photography as expression of human agency" (Costello 2017: 80), but also to better understanding the relation of intentional agency to art. In particular, I will argue that improvisation is artistically relevant to photography if the photo is seen (or understood) as ensuing from a shot that is, being at the same time performative and creative, the enactment of a "grammar of contingency." Precisely in this regard, however, skepticism may arise about the possibility of applying the notion of improvisation to photography in a plausible and adequate way. Even if the photo is improvised, spectators do not directly perceive the process of improvisation, but only its result. Therefore, an account of the artistic specificity of improvisation in photography needs to discuss the aesthetic impact of the improvisational production of the photo on the final product or, to put it differently, the possible transparency of the photo not – as traditionally thought by scholars (see Walton 1984) – with respect to its referent (the photographed object), but with respect to the process of production: is it possible for onlookers to perceive the improvised photographic act? Moreover, is this improvised act artistically relevant? In what follows I propose possible answers to these questions.

2 Photography as Situated and Responsive Practice of Im-pro-visation

Photography seems to have a close relationship with improvisation in the performing arts. From the semiotic point of view, both an improvised performance and a photograph are *deictics*. As music semiologist Eero Tarasti (2002: 185–6) claims, "Improvisation as an utterance is always deictic, that is, an act that points to the moment and place of uttering. Improvisation is a trace of a performance situation in the performance itself." In other words, improvisation refers pragmatically to the situation of improvising, inserting it into the process of artistic production as its constitutive element. Improvisers interact with the spatio-temporal conditions in which they produce their artworks and performances, with fellow performers and spectators, as well as with the artistic media and instruments they have at their disposal. These interactions are not only the ways in which an action plan (i.e., a set of intentions) is implemented, but they challenge the control the artists have over their actions, inviting them to offer *ad hoc* responses to adapt plastically to the changing environment, or even to change the environment through their actions. Therefore,

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the artist's actions occur within a situation that not only provides the contextual framework for a pre-planned performance, but that is imprinted within that very performance, constitutively influencing its specific aesthetic properties. The improvised performance indicates the situation in which it is (or was) produced as part of the process to which it is (or was) produced and as relevant for the product experienced by the audience. This indication is a relevant aesthetic property of improvisation.

Analogously, the photographic image points to the act that produced it and to its specific situation (see Dubois 1983). It is a trace and an imprint not only of the object (its referent), which causes it through the essential contribution of the light and the camera, but also of the photographer's situated action: the shot involves the interaction between photographer, camera, and referent – out of which the image emerges. The photographic image seems relevantly analogous to improvisation in the performing arts because it presents the singular and unrepeatable situation in which the shot was taken and of which it is a *trace*. If the situation of an improvised performance were different, the improvised performance would also be different; analogously, if the situation of the photographic shot were different, the photograph would also be different.

However, the relationship between situation and performance is more than a unilinear, causal one. In photography, just as in performative improvisation (Bertinetto 2016a and 2021a), *situationality* (indexicality) is accompanied by *responsiveness*. The ontological link between the photo and the contingent situation of production has artistic relevance because a consistent part of the image's artistic merit depends on how the photographer interacts with, and responds to, the situation. I contend that the image results from the photographer's responsive confrontation with contingency.

One may think, however, that despite the rigid ontological connection of the photographic image with the spatio-temporal situation of its production, the spectator's viewing of the photographic image is proof that she arrived too late to be able to appreciate how the situation of the photographic act contributed to the photographic image. The case is similar to listeners who approach a recording of a past musical improvisation in which the time of the improvisational process has been frozen. Even if the result of the photographer's shot is ontologically dependent on the specific time of its production, it captures time only by means of stopping and immortalizing it. Observers do not participate in the event of photographic production: the event is no longer there. The image is uprooted from the context that produced it. The co-presence of the photographer's shot with its performative situation is lost: its absence is evidenced by the photograph.

Furthermore, one might also argue that in photography – the reference to Benjamin's 1936 essay "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" (see Benjamin 2008) is more than obvious – the uniqueness of the instant is shown through its potential reproduction and multiplication; whereas in live performance, uniqueness itself is the mark of an improvisation. Photographers can re-elaborate and doctor the photos, trash wrong ones and choose which ones to exhibit: the photographer's formative work seems to consist precisely in this selection process *after* the shot (cf. Eco 1961).

However, these are not decisive reasons to reject the relevance of improvisation for photography. A photo, like a movie, can be significantly similar to the recording of a performative improvisation. First, it is difficult to deny that perceiving a recording of improvised music, theatre, or dance, amounts to perceiving an improvisation. Even though perceiving the event through a recording is neither directly perceiving nor participating in the event,[1] a recording can be an effective means of accessing it. So why should it be different with a photo? In fact, like the recording of a performative improvisation, the photo reveals the prior existence of what observers saw in or through it: the photo certifies or authenticates the existence of the object from which it proceeds (it can lie about the meaning, but not about the existence of the depicted thing: see Barthes 1982: 76–80) and, more precisely and interestingly, it certifies the unrepeatable, singular, and situated interaction that occurred between the photographer's act, the camera, and the referent of

the image, all of which are the elements of a (now absent) mutual co-presence. Second, in music, dance, and theatre improvisation, the improvised performance is unrepeatable, singular, and situational, but its recording can be reproduced and widely disseminated. In the very same way, unrepeatability, singularity, and situatedness are essential properties of the photographic act and of the photographed object, but not of the photo that can be reproduced. As observed by Dubois (1983), the reproducibility of photography operates only in the relationship between signs, while its uniqueness concerns the relationship of each sign with the object that the photo – in itself always singular – denotes and detects, instituting a new kind of "aura": the "aura" of the unrepeatability of the instant (Vaccari 1994: 37), which is also proper to performative improvisation (Sterritt 2000; Bertinetto 2018).

Of course, a photographic image can show, or hide and alter, the connection with the act that produced it and with the situation of its production. But this does not undermine the plausibility of the analogy with an improvisation's recording. The recording of music, theatre, or dance improvisation can provide access to the event of improvisation, but it also manipulates, by means of post-production, the live improvised performance. The recording of an improvisation may testify to the ontological link of the recorded performance with its original situation, but at times it might also adulterate or hide it.

But in addition to the analogy with a recording of a performative improvisation, it can also be argued that photography is improvisation *tout court:* an improvisation in which, as in other non-performing arts like cinema and painting, it is not the coincidence between process and product that is relevant (since the observer can only perceive the latter), but that between invention and realization that characterizes the artists' action(s).[2]

According to the "snapshot aesthetic" of instant photography (unlike posed photography), the image is improvised in the literal sense of being *ex im-pro-viso*: it cannot be seen before shooting, so that it surprises the photographer's gaze, and she sees the result of her act only after its performance. The snapshot strikes the photographer's perception in an unforeseeable way, beyond her control and intentions. One could, therefore, consider the photographer's act intrinsically improvised, given that the camera and the photographed event (the referent of the image) go beyond the photographer's intentional subjective control, surprising it.

3 Photography as an Art? Photographic Seeing, Intentionality and Improvised Action

The Slovenian photographer Evgen Bavcar cannot be surprised by his photos. In fact, because he is blind, he cannot see them. The results of his shots are not only unforeseeable, but unseen and unseeable for him.[3] Their artistic value is therefore not due to their maker's visual control over the image production process. However, they are also not the product of a *photomaton*. Each image is an "actus mentis" imaginatively guided by the descriptions of others. This extreme case highlights the nature of the problem at stake here.

Usually photographers can see the result of their shot, but they cannot preview it exactly before shooting. The snapshot's unforeseeability constitutes a problem for the photo's artistic quality. The inability to foresee the result of one's shot may amount to an improvisation in the pejorative sense of the lack of preparation and organization behind one's making. The pretense of "seeing photographically,"[4] which means the ability "to pre-visualize the image" – separating the intentional, creative idea from the mechanical realization of the photo – may be understood as a way to avoid this problem by overcoming the lack of control over the photographic process and its result by means of a careful preview that enforces formalist criteria on photography, thus neutralizing the specificity of the referent and its uncontrollable contingency (cf. Sontag 2005: 108).

The idea of a "photographic seeing" is, therefore, an attempt to "transcend the camera's mechanical nature to meet the standards of art," by means of a "conscious design" (Sontag 2005: 90), which, by overcoming the "optical unconscious" of the machine,[5] bypasses the supposedly intrinsic flaw of photography. If one assumes that art entails the intentional activity of an artist-author, the preview of the shot may appear as a precondition of photographic artistry. Indeed, as explained by Diarmuid Costello (2017), the artistic character of photography has traditionally been denied on the basis of two beliefs: (1) art requires an agent intentionally manipulating a medium on the basis of an action-plan; (2) the photographer does not properly perform an activity. "Photographic seeing" provides the intentional plan that allows the photographer to control her activity's results. Therefore, it seems to offer what is required for photography to be art.

This position, however, faces both a factual and an ideological problem. The factual problem arises because the effectiveness of a preview is hardly guaranteed, since the result of the shot, as the exhibition of an unforeseeable real, is syntactically non-programmable: going beyond the foreseeable codes of communication, the photo emotionally "pricks" and "pierces" the observer (including the photographer as observer of her own photo) as an unintended accident. Roland Barthes referred to this effect with the notion of *punctum* (Barthes 1982: 32–59; cf. Lopes 2016: 14). In this regard, photography seems rather at the mercy of chance and contingency (Kelsey 2015). Yet, the uncontrollability of the photographic enterprise is not a convincing reason to deny its artistic quality. In other words, "photographic seeing" as the intentional preview of the photographic outcome is not required for photography to be art. Moreover, rather than necessarily hindering the artistic value of photography, in some cases improvisation can be understood as its very factual condition. The second, ideological, problem concerns the very notion of art as an author's intentional and controlled production (Barthes 1977; Foucault 1979). This idea is not indisputable, as a brief discussion of the *vexata quaestio* of photography as artistic practice will demonstrate.

A widespread idea since the dawn of photographic technology is that the "making of photographs is, in an important sense, not dependent on the photographer" (Lopes 2016: 14): photography has often been considered to be a sort of agent-free operation, an automatic, optical-chemical or optical-electronic process that rules out a proper human contribution (see Sontag 2005: 123). According to this idea, the photo ensues from an automatic process in which the photographer's agency, at best, plays a minor role. Photography seems (or has seemed) to rule out the need for an artist working (with) a material: As Pierre Bourdieu (1998: 77) wrote, "the photographic act in every way contradicts the popular representation of artistic creation as effort and toil. Can an art without an artist still be an art?" This is a crucial question.

Bourdieu (1998: 78) continues:

> The ambiguous situation of photography within the system of the fine arts could lead, among other things, to this contradiction between the value of the work, which realizes the aesthetic ideal that is still most widespread, and the value of the act that produces it.

The point is that, as Sontag (2005: 41) put it, "photographs don't seem deeply beholden to the intentions of an artist." The photographer seems to be a servant of the machine and of "nature," who are the real agents of the photographic process: it is light that, with the aid of a technical device, the camera, and of the real objects placed in front of it, *writes* the image (Fox Talbot 1844; see Sontag 2005: 68; Costello 2017: 27 ff.).

As a consequence, the photographic image may appear to be the mechanical reproduction of its referent. Diarmuid Costello calls this thesis "Orthodoxy," variously declined from the historical beginnings of photographic practice up to the present day. It is the philosophical formalization of the view of the photographic process as a natural or "mind-independent" causality, and of the photographic image as the objective reproduction of reality endowed with an epistemic

privilege that surpasses other ways of accessing the world. "So conceived, photography consists in self-generated 'natural' images," of the same kind of traces, shadows, footprints, and fingerprints (Costello 2017: 48), that refer accurately to the objects they depict inasmuch they figure among their own causes. Therefore, photographs differ from humanly mediated (and, supposedly, epistemically unreliable) depictions that are "intentional," "handmade," and "agential," such as drawings and paintings (Costello 2017: 25). Resulting from a causal, unintentional process, the photo is a *transparent* image with respect to the reality that is its referent (Walton 1984). According to Scruton (1981), this prevents the photograph from being the product of a photographer's intentional action that expresses her point of view with respect to what is depicted. Since representation requires the agent's intentionality to be capable of manifesting the latter's point of view, photography would not be representational and, therefore, would not be art: photography, Scruton argues, has nothing of the expressive representation that is proper to art.

Against this view, it has been reasonably argued that the photographic process does not exclude the photographer's agency. On the one hand, the camera's automatism does not rule out the photographer's intentional action. The camera's work, which standardizes and "requires the mechanizing out of human […] labour in the service of human ends" (Costello 2017: 55), cannot be reduced to a simple imprinting. The photo ensues from several non-automatic actions happening away from the device: the photographic process consists not only in the manipulation of light, but also in the control of chemical reactions through the use of accelerators, inhibitors, temperatures; the photographer must make decisions about set-up, perspective, lighting, framing, film, paper stock, and the darkroom. So it is false to claim that in photography everything can be explained in causal terms and that intentionality plays no role in the photographic process. Intentionality and causality are not opposed to each other: intentionality is manifested in the way that several causal processes are organized for human aims by means of imagination, conception, and vision (Costello 2017: 29, 54, 63, 68, and 88).

On the other hand, compared to other image-producing activities like drawing and painting, the photographic depiction can be understood as non-intentional, in that this process reduces human control and depicts "by belief-independent feature tracking that is not intentional" (Lopes 2016: 68). As Robin Kelsey (2015: 39) writes,

> [a]n automatic process sandwiched between the chance encounter and the accidental inclusion, photography combined immense depictive capacity with weak intentionality. It dispensed with the godlike designing powers of the artist in favor of aesthetic sensibility, serendipity, and the play of chance.

One may think that since actions are intentional events and photos do not result out of intentional depiction, photography does not involve the exercise of the artist's agency. Yet, a theory of action that strongly binds actions to intentions as their causes is not only too demanding, but unable to clarify the difference between actions and events. This is famously illustrated by the problem of the wrong "causal chains," which is clearly explained by Lopes (2016: 71; cf. Chisholm 1966; Bertinetto 2015 and 2016a: 81–91):

> What happens from a mechanical point of view when a hand is jostled, causing a shutter to trip and an image to be made, is no different from what happens, from a mechanical point of view, when the shutter is tripped deliberately. The same causal chain eventuates. Yet, the latter is an act of taking a picture, while the former is just something that happens.

Hence, there is no need to reject automatism and chance in order to account for the intentionality of the photographic act and for the artistic character of photography (cf. C. Chamboredon in Bourdieu 1998: 139). Automatism is not an impediment to intentional agency. In order for a photo

to be the artistic outcome of a creative act, there is no need for an author "exerting intentional control over the art work in its every detail" (Lopes 2016: 72). All that is required for understanding an event as an action is acknowledging that an agent is responsible for the event under one description that offers reasons for this claim (Anscombe 2000; Bagnoli 2010). So if under some description we can understand (1) the photographer as the maker of the photo, even though she did not control the whole process, and (2) the process as an action, even though some of its causes were independent of human agency, what happened can reasonably be understood as a photographic process that can result in an artistic achievement and not as an automatic or chance event that, at best, yields a (sort of) natural beauty. The distinction is between the photo taken by the photographer who carries out her activity deliberately, and the photo created only by virtue of a causal series of contingencies: the wind hits the table on which the camera is placed making it fall, thereby causing the shutter to click due to the impact with the floor. The latter is not the result of agency, while the former is, even if the photographer does not control the whole process (see Beisbart, this volume, for an application of this idea to performing improvisation).

My point is that in this regard the origin of the artistic value of photography is analogous to that of improvisation in the performing arts. The improviser is defined as such by not seeing what she does before doing it: her action is not strictly controlled by an intention as its cause; otherwise the performance would not be improvisation, but the execution of a plan. This does not mean, however, that improvisation is a "quasi-action" (Rousselot 2012). Despite the performers' preparation in terms of technical, physical, and cultural skills, the performance's artistic value results from the interactions that performers cannot completely control with the medium of their specific practice (sounds, movements, gestures, speech etc.), with other performers, and with the performative situation. Still, whatever happens is due to their *agency,* because under an appropriate definition of the term they are acknowledged as *responsible* for what happened.

Moreover, the performance of an action plan is not the mechanical execution of an immutable algorithm, because the success of an action plan may require the action to cope with the concrete situation of its realization and thereby to involve the transformation of the plan (cf. Sennett 2008; Preston 2013; Bertinetto and Bertram 2020). In this sense, improvisation exhibits a key aspect of human agency: the concrete circumstances of the action are parts of the action, which means that the action cannot be rightly described without referring to the concrete circumstances of its occurrence. The action cannot be understood by only referring to a previous intention. It rather realizes itself as interaction with its specific situation: its meaning is generated through its exercise within its specific situation. Therefore, far from being a kind of semi-action, improvisation is paradigmatic of the fact that intentionality, as a sense of agency, emerges through the actual realization of the action within a specific situation and its constraints.

In this sense, photography is (like) improvisation. The fact that improvisers do not completely control the action by pre-viewing its happening but are involved in a complex process of interactions does not preclude that improvisation can be art. In the same way, even though the photographer does not completely preview the shot's result, which ensues from the interaction with the machine and the photographic situation, photography entails an agency and produces images that can be artworks.

It can certainly be argued that both practices, artistic improvisation and photography, place the agent's lack of control over their work in the foreground. This thesis does not *challenge* the artistic import of both improvisation and photography, but rather *supports* the view that improvisation and photography are *paradigmatically* artistic. In fact, by countering the view of art as controlled agency while respecting, in the already discussed way, the requirement of intentionality, artistic creativity can be thought of in terms of the artists' lack of total prescient control over their work: otherwise, the artists' work would not result in a *creative* achievement. Indeed, could something completely foreseen by its author be truly creative? (Bertinetto 2012, 2019, 2021a). Consequently,

it is reasonable to argue the that artist's agency does not consist in the absolute dominion over forms and materials, but rather in interactions that are passive and active at the same time and from which a creative outcome, the artwork, may emerge in previously unforeseeable ways that surprise the artists' intentions. Such a position does not at all rule out that artists can work, as is often the case, on the basis of action plans; but these plans are implemented through the unforeseeable interactions that occur in the course of the artistic production. In both photography and improvisation, authorship can be understood under a model different from the idea of an artist controlling the production process in advance: it may be understood as resulting from the acknowledgement of what happened after the fact.[6]

In short, the orthodox creed, summed up philosophically by Scruton – photography is not art because the photographer does not know what she is doing; properly, she does nothing – can be reversed by arguing that photography can be an art if understood as an improvisational practice and if improvisation *is* understood, as I think it should be, as a paradigmatic kind of action and as a paradigmatic way of making art.

4 *Celare artem*. Photography, Improvisation and the "Readymade"

Orthodoxy's rejection of the artistic value of photography largely relies on a view of art as dependent on an artist who clearly guides the artistic process and on the idea that, conversely, the photographic process is subject to automatism and chance, so that the photo reproduces its referent without the photographer's expressive contribution. Both claims can be summarized by the thesis that photography is not art because it excludes photographer's agency. We just saw that this accusation can be rejected both by denying that the photographer does not intentionally contribute to the artistic outcome and by endorsing a more plausible notion of agency, which can be nicely applied to art, thereby linking photography to improvisation. Yet, this link can also offer a third argumentative strategy for defending the artistic value of photography. Even if we bite the bullet and admit the photographer's substantial lack of action, this is still not enough to deny the artistic dignity of photography.

Indeed, improvisation and photography favor a rhetoric of *spontaneity*, according to which artists conceal or even deny their active contributions to their artworks. By embracing spontaneity as the lack of intention, control, work, and as reliance on the contingency of the unforeseeable event of the performance or of the photo shoot, improvisation and photography may be understood as *sprezzatura* practices: examples of *art as the absence of art(-making)* (D'Angelo 2018).

Improvisation, as mentioned above, develops through interactions from which a performance emerges, the articulation of which is not rigidly controlled by individual performers. It performs and stages a creative process, which in the Romantic period favored the *topos* of the inspired artist as not *compos sui*, unknowing what she does, not foreseeing her actions, working as in *trance and not consciously acting*: possessed by the *Genius* as a (super)natural force superseding human agency (see Landgraf 2011: 59–83, for the aesthetics of the Genius, and 84–108, for the romantic self-reflexive departure from it).

Photography, when it lets go of its reference to painting – typical of the aesthetics of photographic seeing – as a conscious and controlled use of techniques and materials, could also be conceived as a practice that conceals or even erases skillful conscious creativity. Thus, it is reasonable to understand it as significantly akin to the art of the *readymade*: their manifest ontological differences notwithstanding, in both practices the reality of an encountered (thus not created) object is exhibited as art. As suggested by Sontag (2005: 54),

> [p]hotographs are, of course, artifacts. But their appeal is that they also seem, in a world littered with photographic relics, to have the status of found objects – unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real.[7]

Indeed, "all subjects are merely *objets trouvés*" (Sontag 2005: 37); and since "an aesthetic which makes the signifier completely subordinate to the signified […] can be better realised in photography than in other arts" (Bourdieu 1998: 86), it seems plausible to frame the *aesthetics of photography* in terms of an *aesthetics of the readymade*: as Claudio Marra (2001: 191) suggests, the reduction of manual skills in photography is the very same phenomenon that Dadaists made the qualifying trait of their own poetics. Despite their respective differences – the photo evokes the presence (of the object) through (its) absence, while the *readymade* evokes the absence of (of representation) through the presence (of a real object) – the relationship of uniqueness between the object and its exposure – indicating it as actually or artificially present – is analogous. The fact that Duchamp called the performative procedure of the *readymade* a "snapshot effect" is quite telling in this regard: as explained by Rosalind Krauss (1985: 206), both *readymades* and photographs work as indexes that select their objects. Consequently, photography is art (at least) in the same sense in which *readymades* are art. Both are extremes cases of *sprezzatura*: *art as the elimination of art*.

Now, improvised performance also has a strong connection with the *readymade* (Bertinetto 2016b). Both practices present the end of the separation between art and life and art and reality. The *readymades* are real objects that enter the realm of art by virtue of an ontological-semantic "transfiguration" (Danto 1981). They suspend the traditional distinction between art and life, showing that everything can be art. Improvisation, in which invention and performance coincide, suspends the separation between art and life in the opposite way. While exhibiting the real production process, it exposes art as actual, as real life, and not as fictional appearance. The audience, while perceiving the artistic phenomenon, attends (perhaps through a deferred broadcasting) to the real process of artistic production – a process, as we saw, not completely controlled by a dominant *Author*. Furthermore, similar to improvisation, *readymade* art arises from a performance in which invention and realization – both being reduced to zero – coincide, given that the artist does not produce any material artifact that is not already there. Analogously, *readymades* play a key role in improvisational practices: *readymade* prepared materials and forms (like musical formulas) are resources that improvisers draw on in their creative performances (cf. McKenzie 2000).

Hence, my point is that improvisation and photography meet through the common denominator of the *readymade* to which both are, differently, related. Thus, like the *readymade*, they both offer versions of the aesthetics of *sprezzatura* that questions, conceals, and ultimately eliminates the idea of art as the work of an omniscient *Author* in absolute control over the situation of production. As a consequence, one may even deny that improvisation and photography are proper forms of artistic work. Still, as *readymade* art shows, this does not prevent them from being art.

5 Between Action and Event: Specific Forms of Photographic Improvisation

Understanding photography in terms of improvisation seems theoretically appropriate. It not only accounts for the situatedness and responsiveness of the photographic act, but also answers the question of photography's status as an art by revising the way in which the photographic process, artistic production, and intentional action have been understood "orthodoxically." Moreover, even if one resists understanding photography and improvisation in terms of proper actions (of course, as argued in Section 3, this is not my position), the venerable *topos* of the *sprezzatura* – *ars est celare artem* ("art is to conceal art") – can still be updated, in a new context, to salvage the rights of both photography and improvisation to be understood as artistic phenomena through the mediation of the *readymade*.

However, this view faces another problem. The fact that (instant) photography as such may be *generally* understood in terms of improvisation seems to weaken the relevance of a *specific* improvisational aesthetics for photography. If every photo is somehow improvised, the specificity of an aesthetic of photographic improvisation risks disappearing, as when all musical, theatrical, or dance performances are understood as essentially improvised (as argued by Gould and Keaton 2000).

In other words, linking photography to improvisation can be a good way to defend photography as an art. But could we find a role for a specific aesthetics of photographic improvisation? The answer, I think, is yes.

5.1 The "Decisive Moment"

Improvisation can be understood as the coincidence between invention and realization: the creative and responsive interaction with the concrete situation in which artists, as human beings, are involved, as well as the enactment of an artistic "grammar of contingency" (Bertinetto 2021a). In this formulation, the notion of *grammar* must be understood in the Wittgensteinian sense of a network of norms capable of making sense of human practices from within the practices themselves (Wittgenstein 1953). The notion of contingency, however, is more complex.

In one sense, contingency means *accidental* contingency, i.e., the *opposite of what occurs necessarily*: what could have been different. As such it may be *arbitrary* contingency (what happens could have been different, if we had chosen differently) or *destinal* contingency (what happened could have been different independently from human interventions). Applied to art, the notion concerns qualities allegedly unnecessary for the constitutive conditions of a specific artistic genre (e.g., the smell of paint for painting), as well as the artists' personal preferences. But it also involves factual existential conditions that artists cannot choose, such as being born in a certain time and place.

In another sense, contingency is *chance*: an event that goes beyond expectations, usual conditions, or action plans. Chance contingency runs counter to/challenges an author's intentions, the conventions and rules of an artistic genre, and the organizational form of an artwork. Although contingency, in this sense, may concern failure due to an artist's incompetence or other unexpected factors, the artistic form does not suppress it, but *deals* with it (cf. Adorno 2002: 143). Improvisation epitomizes this formative and situational interaction with contingency. In improvisation, a formative process is in play with the aim of dealing with contingency (what happens in an artistic performance) in an aesthetically sensible way. The point of artistic improvisation is to generate artistic meanings by virtue of the artist's interaction with contingency. It is not just a matter of dominating contingency, but of responding responsibly to it, treating it as a kind of "artistic material," or as a condition of artistic production. In this sense, improvisation develops an "artistic grammar of contingency."

As the enactment of such a grammar of contingency, improvisation can be both the specific subject and a specific aesthetic quality of the photographic image. Improvisation is the *subject* or the *content* of the photographic image when the moment is caught by surprise, or rather when the sudden character of an event or improvised action is exhibited in the photo. *Street photography* enhances the artistic relevance of the ontological connection between the act of photographing and the concrete situation that is its environment – of which the acting photographer is a part – and becomes the object of the photo. The photographed subject is taken by surprise by the photographer's shot or performs an unexpected action for those who perceive it, surprising the photographer and, through her, the observer. This surprise is due to the instant created by the camera that sees instantaneously. Aesthetically, it is not always a positive surprise: the snapshot resulting from high-speed shutters may fix elusive facial expressions, often similar to unusual grimaces, which the eye normally cannot see and which are undesirable revelations for their makers (examples are the frozen images that are captured when we press the "pause" button on our computer while viewing the footage of a person speaking). In this way the photographed subject may also be the inopportune victim of the photographer's immoral aggression (cf. Danto 2008), the same way a person may be the victim of an improvised wit.

A specific, valuable aesthetic role for improvisation in artistic photography may derive from stressing the occasionality of the photographic act that takes place in real-time (Scott 2007: 38, 47). The contingent unpredictability of the scene becomes a constituent ingredient of the aesthetic

result of the photo, in that the given is signified by the very fact of being revealed to the eye such that the chronological, ephemeral instant becomes the kairological and significant moment. The photographer's attitude can be that of spying and hunting a prey to conquer, as in Cartier-Bresson's theory of the "decisive moment." Its point is that the *ex improviso* manifestation of an event as a felicitous visual moment in the photo requires some assistance from the preparation of the photographer and his exercise of "photographic seeing." The picture has basically two elements: a premeditated geometrical scenario, and the event that "comes about by sheer chance" (Clément Chéroux, quoted in Kelsey 2015: 201; cf. Davies 2008). Rather than an *auteur*, the photographer is like an improvising *actor* (Montier 1995), who "instinctually senses when the decisive moment *has* arrived" (Kelsey 2015: 202 f.) and, by surprising life as it is happening, grasps an ephemeral event as an opportune moment for interacting photographically with the situation. The shot then results from a dialectic between mastery and chance, and between the photographer's action and the photographed event, through which an artistic grammar of contingency is elaborated: the serendipitous and unexpected revelation of the moment is made possible by the "special eye" that allows the photographer "to see the unexpected and then photograph it" (Lopes 2016: 82), thereby performing an "instant composition" (Scott 2007: 49).

Yet, the improvisational aspect of photography can also be radicalized precisely by avoiding strategies of forecasting and composition. In such a case the photo might reveal not (only) that the shot takes the photographed subject by surprise, but (also) that the photographed event takes the photographer by surprise. In this vein and critical of the idea of hunting the "decisive moment" on the basis of a "photographic seeing," the Greek photographer Dimitri Mellos operates in an immersive manner by intermingling with the events that the photo will reveal. As he writes,

> […] part of the perfection of a perfect street scene is its total unpredictability, the fact that it catches you by surprise. So, by definition, I would not be able to envision it in advance, nor would I want to.[8]

But, in addition, the improvisational character of photography might also rely on a specific *aesthetic quality* of the photo that might *stage* the authenticity of an improvised shot through a blurry and blurred image that, by exposing the involvement of the photographic act in the photographed event, intensifies the impression of the shot's contingency – and/or of the movement of the referent, as in Anton Giulio Bragaglia's "Photodynamis" – and stages an improvisational approach to photographic practice (cf. Ullrich 2009: 123–35).

However, as this case suggests, the aesthetic significance of photographic improvisation seems to be compromised by the fact that the improvised aspect of a photographic image may be the deliberately sought result of a prepared fiction where the shown improvisational authenticity is a staged or a simulated improvisation, not an authentic one. In this regard, two different paradigmatic approaches may be distinguished. Philip Lorca diCorcia's photos only *stage* seemingly sudden and accidental encounters with their referents, while Jeff Wall's "cast photography" (Lopes 2016: 58–64), chosen by Michael Fried (2008) as paradigmatic of photography as artistic practice, reflexively *exhibits* the staged origin of its improvisational appearance. And just as improvisational spontaneity can be exhibited as a rhetorical *topos* (see Fertel 2015 for the discussion of this topic in the literary field), the "decisive moment" can also be treated reflexively and denounced as (a kind of) artistic lie by the photographic image: the declared staging of the photo as a visually rather uninteresting result of the selection of one outcome of a performative play with randomness is the way the photographic poetics of John Baldessari's *Throwing Three Balls* photo series (1973) challenges the ideology of the "decisive moment," not by eliminating preparation and composition (as Mellos does), but by replacing the kairological time of improvisation with aleatoric indifference (Kelsey 2015: 291–7; Lopes 2016: 68).

In addition, the staging of the encounter with contingency reveals the artistic significance that observers assign to the improvised production of a photograph that captures, as it were, the fleeting moment. The photographic improvisation is artistically relevant when the photo is – or *seems* – transparent with respect to the improvised action of the photographic shot. And although, often, one cannot reliably judge, merely by looking at the photo, whether this improvised quality is due to a truly improvised shot or to the staging of an improvised encounter, knowing how the photographer made her photo can be relevant for the aesthetic appreciation of the image. Just as information about the improvised character of an artistic performance may be necessary for its correct appreciation, the correct appreciation of a photo may also depend on the knowledge of its mode of production.[9]

5.2 The Dilated Moment

The poetics of the decisive moment are about the revelation of the ephemeral instant that surprises the observers (both the photographer and the spectator of the photo) and that the eye cannot directly grasp. The photographic act is a performance that generates an event, making it an image. Yet the photographic act may also show its performative, situated, and responsive interaction with the event it depicts and of which it is a part, thereby counteracting the idea that "there is no performance of photography in photography" (Scott 2007: 38). As performance, photography can (1) produce, and show, or (2) imply, and take advantage of, a "dilated moment": the dilated moment of the photographer's interaction with the photographed scene and/or the dilated moment of the viewers'/users' interaction with the image.

1 As improvised performance, the photo can show that "the camera can be a means not only of recording a scene, but a condition of the scene thereby recorded. Had there been no camera to record them, these scenes would never have existed" (Costello 2017: 144). In this way, the photographer can display "his own intervention in the creation of his images," by focusing "attention on the improvised, hands-on process of creating the work" (Costello 2017: 145), as in James Welling's photography: the photographer interacts with the situation, not by interrupting the temporal flow, but by acting over time, thereby producing a form in an unexpected way and testifying that artistic photography consists in the relation between two elements. These are the photographer and the world, not the photo and world.

   In particular, an accurate use of exposure, in real time, can generate an articulated sense of time through the artistic use of feedback (from the situation to the photographic act), thus diverting the shot towards unexpected results (Vaccari 1994: 121). It is not just the possibility of representing the flow of time through the image of spatial movement returned by a layered photograph, resulting from the dilation of the exposure time – as in the photos by Michael Wesely.[10] Rather, the improvisational aspect of photography emerges when the attention shifts from the product to the process: the scene of the image would not be, and would not make sense, regardless of the intervention of the photographer, whose performative (past) presence is exhibited in the photo.[11] Photography becomes a performance that interacts with the shooting situation and transforms it through the composition of multiple points of view. It is the specific photographic poetics of the Italian photographer Germano Scurti who, working with very long exposure temporalities, emphasizes, by recording it, his physical-gestural interaction with the camera and with the photographed event (often an artistic performance), without being able to foresee the result of the shot, given that with very long exposure times the display goes dark. The purpose of this "action painting with camera" (Scurti's definition) is not the reproduction of reality, but the "production of an 'event' that has value in itself, regardless of its referential meaning, as an immediate perception of life" (Figures 42.1 and 42.2).

Figure 42.1 Germano Scurti, *Improvviso con Jazz*, 2016. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Figure 42.2 Germano Scurti, *Winnie. Stage Photos from S. Beckett's "Happy Days"*, 2016. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Here photography aims at realizing

> [a] relationship between the creative technical device and the world no longer linked to the vision, to the gaze, to the history of the gaze, to its predatory mechanisms, to the possession and manipulation of the world, but to blindness, to its possibilities of creating care and aesthetic transfiguration in the extemporaneousness it establishes and in the alea it produces.[12]

The same relationship occurs in the interaction with contingency at stake in improvised music, theatre, and dance. The fact that, in the decisive moment, the photographer is blind and lacks control over what she is doing, does not imply that in the dilated moment of the process

she is not acting artistically. Intentions are not the necessary conditions of agency; chance, automatism, happenstance, and improvisation do not prevent artistic achievements (cf. Lopes 2012). Costello and Lopes (2019: 167) explain this in relation to James Welling's photograph *Flowers* (2006):

> Photographers rely on input from the world in a direct and concrete way, even if they are not constrained by it in all the ways that conceiving photography as a purely receptive affair would have us imagine. Being a photographer involves knowing what to do with, and how to respond to, what the world provides. Different kinds of photography no doubt mobilize this know-how in different ways, and at different stages of the process; but whenever a process involves trial and error, the photographer must rely on know-how and past experience to indicate the directions likely to prove profitable for exploration. At the crucial moment, Welling may be photographing blind, but the making of *Flowers* is anything but floundering: the set-up is tailor-made to solicit the fortuitous accident, the quirk of circumstance or process, that prevents Welling falling back into the trap of the tried and tested.

2 Another case of a dilated moment showing the relevance of the aesthetics of improvisation, as the artistic grammar of contingency, for photography lies in the *use* made of the images. The traditional instant photo has usually had a close relationship with the contextual circumstance of its production, even in terms of the users (like family members and friends) to whom it was addressed; but the pragmatic dimension of the photo is nowadays even more pervasive and intrusive: we all take and post improvised photos, like selfies, to indicate ourselves and our places to the circle of our real-time contacts in the virtual space of social media. In this framework, photographic improvisation may consist of performing interactions through the self-reference of the photographer in the image. Italian photographer Pietro Privitera has artistically ennobled digital photography's communicative immediacy by spreading the moment caught by the camera (of a smartphone) through the internet via Instagram – a sort of digital version of the polaroid, which had already made possible the immediate vision of the snapshot – but by applying new filters that transfigure its ordinary, kitschy aspect.

This is another kind of photographic interactive practice; but rather than exploit the specific situation of the shot, the photographer interacts with virtual collectivities (as a concrete expression of current reality). Thus, the photo becomes artistic by means of exposing its participation in collective life[13]:

> The total sharing of the photos on Instagram develops an event that is the result not only of the individual but of an intelligent collective. For this reason, the photograph posted and shared on Instagram is already a new photograph: every single user who shares and is shared participates in a process that enriches and enriches itself, just as happens in every real language, also, and above all, through the errors and imperfections of millions of anonymous contributions.
>
> *(Privitera 2016: 31; my translation: A. B.)*

This ulterior and artistically relevant improvisational dimension of photography involves both production and use (in mutual interaction) at the level of collective interaction that is mediated via social media through technological devices such as smartphones, tablets, and PCs – tools that are, at the very same time, the means of production, diffusion, and reception of the photographic image (Figures 42.3 and 42.4). Privitera's photos, reflexively make artistic sense and use of the everyday practices of digital snapshot improvisation in terms of generation and circulation. Thus, improvisation in this case concerns the speed of production

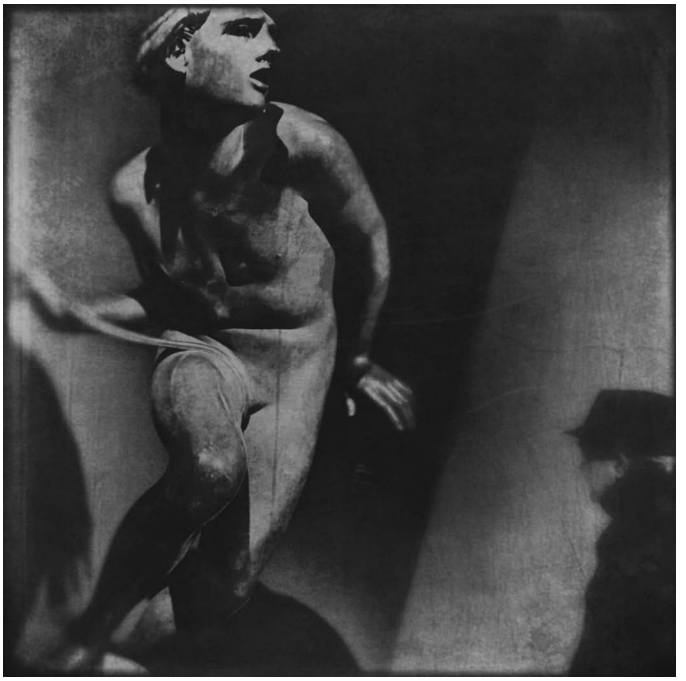

Figure 42.3 Pietro Privitera, *The Caption from WUNDERGRAM*, 2014–2016. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Figure 42.4 Pietro Privitera, *Dark Dancer from WUNDERGRAM*, 2014–2016. Photo courtesy of the artist.

and diffusion, its occasional character and distracted enjoyment, but also its potential for generating communicative visual and verbal interactions from which its artistic meaning and identity are reshaped in unforeseeable ways.

6 Conclusion

In this chapter I argued that improvisation can be artistically relevant for photography. Instant photography as such seems to have much in common with improvisation, in particular due to its indexical nature. This does not prevent photography from being an artistic practice: photography seems to share with improvisation, and with readymade art, a kind of agency that cannot be described in terms of the execution of an intentional project and endowed with crucial aspects of artistic creativity. Furthermore, photographic practice can resort to improvisation as a specific artistic resource. On the one hand, the improvisation of a photographic shot can capture the decisive moment resulting from the encounter between the photographer and the contingent situation of the photo, even though the transparency of the photographic image with respect to the improvisational nature of the shot may be, intentionally or not, deceptive, illusory, or exhibited as ideological and aesthetically indifferent. On the other hand, the photo can manifest the performative character of photographic practice as an improvised interaction with the photographed scene and as an interaction between the photographer, the image, and its users through digital media.[14]

Related Topics

Beisbart, C. (This Volume) "Improvisation and Action Theory."
Bertinetto, A. and Ruta, M. (This Volume) "Improvisation in Painting".

Notes

1 Even this claim can be questioned. First, one can perceive a video- and audio-recorded event exactly at the same time in which the event is taking place: this is what happens when we listen to a concert broadcasted live on radio or television or through the internet. Second, the media broadcast of the event may be part of the live event: often rock and pop concerts in open spaces make use of screens showing the event in which the listener is participating in the course of its happening and nowadays the internet makes possible mediatic interactions in which the audience can participate. See Auslander (2008) on the complexity of the notion of *liveness*; see Bertinetto (2021b) on musical improvisation and the internet.

2 See Mouëllic (2013) and Collins (2019) for cinematic improvisation and Gilmour (2000), Landgraf (2018), and Bertinetto and Ruta's (this volume) for pictorial improvisation.

3 Cf. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lAY_Jf7Psss&feature=emb_rel_end;%20http://www.evgen-bavcar.com/ (accessed November 12, 2020). I thank Walter Menon for introducing Evgen Bavcar to me.

4 This is the title of the essay published in 1943 by Edward Weston.

5 See Benjamin's "Little History of Photography" (1931), in Benjamin (2008).

6 This favors the idea that photographic authorship may be assigned to a corpus of works, rather than to a single item (cf. Schaeffer 1983: 159, 184; Sontag 2005: 107; Kelsey 2015: 267–9). I venture that this could be interestingly valid also for artistic improvisation, especially in the performing arts.

7 Cf. Sontag (2005: 101):

> For the now familiar practice that substitutes encounter for fabrication, found objects or situations for made (or made-up) ones, decision for effort, the prototype is photography's instant art through the mediation of a machine. It was photography that first put into circulation the idea of an art that is produced not by pregnancy and childbirth but by a blind date (Duchamp's theory of 'rendezvous').

8 https://www.lensculture.com/articles/dimitri-mellos-street-photography-s-perfect-unpredictability (accessed November 12, 2020).

9 This is a traditional anti-empiricist and contextualist argument.

10 Some of his photos of Potsdamer Platz and other places in Berlin are the result of an exposure time lasting over two years. See https://wesely.org (accessed August 10, 2020).
11 Think of James Welling's photographic work. His "handling of filters and glasses is a performance; indeed it is highly improvised" (Costello and Lopes 2019: 163).
12 G. Scurti, personal communication (my translation: A. B.).
13 This highlights that photographic art is not exclusively the performance of an individual artist, but is a collaborative performance, sometimes improvisational, between many agents: the device makers, the photographer, the subjects of the photographic scene, the photo developers and editors, and everyone circulating the photo through publications and social media. I thank Robert Valgenti for an important comment on this point.
14 Previous versions of this text have been presented in conferences held at the universities of Padua, Murcia and Belo Horizonte. I thank all participants – and, in particular, Elisa Caldarola, Francisca Perez Carreño, Lisa Giombini, Simona Chiodo, Robert Hopkins, Jerrold Levinson, Pol Capdevila, Salvador Rubio, Matilde Carrasco, Maria José Alcaraz León, Vitor Moura, Walter Menon, Giorgia Cecchinato, and Rodrigo Duarte for their feedback and questions. I am also very grateful to Dominic McIver Lopes, Marcello Ruta, Paolo Furia, and Robert Valgenti for commenting on a draft version of this chapter. Many thanks to Robert Valgenti also for proofreading this article.

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43

IMPROVISATION AND INSTALLATION ART

Elisa Caldarola

1 Introduction

This chapter illustrates through the analysis of some examples how philosophical research can illuminate the improvisational aspects of installation art. There is little philosophical research on improvisation in the visual arts.[1] Furthermore, there is limited philosophical research on installation art – in Section 2, I mention some key claims that have been put forward.[2] Not surprisingly, then, philosophers have not yet focused – at least to my knowledge – on improvisation in installation art. The issue, though, is timely. Not only have installation artists explored improvisation in their practice (see Section 3) but, as I shall argue, it can be claimed that some works of installation art represent or express improvisation (Section 4), that some invite the public to engage in improvisation (Section 5), and that curatorial teams responsible for the displays of certain installation artworks have the opportunity to introduce improvisational elements in their practice, if they so wish (Section 6).

2 Installation Art

Three uses of the term "installation" can be distinguished within the art jargon: the first appears in expressions such as "curatorial installation" and "installation of (an) artwork(s)," which refer to the display of one or more artworks in a museum or other exhibition space. The second use appears in expressions such as "mixed-media installation" and "photographic installation," which refer to sets of displayed objects ("mixed-media installation" refers to an artwork composed of objects in different media, such as paintings, sculptures, and videos, while "photographic installation" typically refers to a set of photographic artworks that have been intended by their maker for being put on show together). Finally, the third use appears in the expression "installation art." Works of installation art are spatial environments meant to be experienced from within: art theorists (see, e.g., Reiss 1999; Bishop 2005) have argued that in works of installation art the region of space where the objects partially constituting the work are collocated is integral to the display of the works and that "the spectator is in some way regarded as integral to the completion of the work" (Reiss 1999: xiii). In the rest of this section, I shall briefly sketch out a view of installation art that emerges from available accounts. In the rest of the chapter, I shall focus on the improvisational aspects emerging from the practice of installation art.

Art theorist Claire Bishop (2005) describes some kinds of experience that are distinctive of our encounters with installation art. In the first place, there are "dream scene" (47) experiences, prompting the public's psychological absorption by means of presenting everyday materials among

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which the public is physically immersed. This is the case, for instance, with works such as Allan Kaprow's *Yard* (Pasadena Art Museum, 1967), where the artist recreated a junkyard; or the felt and fat installations by Joseph Beuys. In the second place, there are "heightened perception" (48) experiences, that encourage the viewer to think about how she perceives the world, such as those aroused by minimalist works, as well as by environments by Hélio Oiticica and Ernesto Neto, or by works by Dan Graham, which experiment on perception and interaction among spectators. In the third place, there are "mimetic engulfment" (82) experiences, aroused by works that, rather than "heightening awareness of our perceiving body and its physical boundaries […] seem to dislodge or annihilate our sense of self" (82), such as James Turrel's immersive light installations and sound installations by Janet Cardiff. In the fourth place, there are "activated spectatorship" (102) experiences, manifesting "a desire to address viewers in the plural and to set up specific relationships between them – not as a function of perception […] but in order to generate communication between visitors who are present in the space" (102) – the genre of installation art aiming to arouse the latter kind of experiences was first explored by works such as Joseph Beuys' *Bureau for Direct Democracy* at Documenta 5 (1972), and has been flourishing since the 1990s, with works by Rirkrit Tiravanija, Santiago Serra, and Thomas Hirschhorn, among others.

Art theorist Anne Ring Petersen (2015) agrees with Bishop that analyzing the experience of the viewer is crucial for understanding works of installation art, but also stresses the distinctive role played by the spatial constitution of such works: unlike sculptures, works of installation art construe physical spaces rather than self-concluded objects and are, therefore, more similar to works of architecture and theatre stages where members of the public, rather than actors, are invited to perform.

Philosopher Juliane Rebentisch (2012) offers an understanding of installation art that emphasizes its continuity with traditional art forms, apparently presenting "autonomous," self-contained objects, rather than physically immersive environments encompassing the public. In a nutshell, Rebentisch argues that no artwork is self-contained, because, qua artwork, it exists only in relation to the subject who appreciates it *as an artwork* (see, e.g., Rebentisch 2012: 15). According to this account, then, the peculiarity of works of installation art seems to lie not so much in their relational character, but rather in the fact that they *thematize* the relationality of art by exemplifying it at its strongest, through the creation of physically immersive environments.

The participatory character of some works of installation art is emphasized by Sherri Irvin (forthcoming). As she explains, some artists establish "rules of participation" for their works of installation art, which require the public to perform specific actions while experiencing the works. For instance, in *pad thai* (Paula Allen Gallery, New York, 1990), Rirkrit Tiravanija invited the public to consume the food he cooked inside the gallery space. Interestingly, according to Irvin, members of the public are not the only kind of subjects who can be involved in the making of installation artworks: curatorial teams also can have their share of participation, since works of installation art "centrally involve the expression of parameters for the constitution of a display; and depending on the work, the displays may (or even must) vary dramatically from one exhibition to the next" (Irvin 2013: 242–3; see also forthcoming). For instance, Liz Magor's *Production* (1980) is composed of some 2,800 loose bricks along with the manual press the artist used to produce the bricks by pressing wet newspaper sheets. As Irvin argues,

> [t]he nature of this work not only allows but demands reconfiguration. The work comments on the relation between the labour of production and the creative task of construction; the labourer simply produces the units, which may then be manipulated in a multitude of ways. Always to display the bricks in the same way would be to obscure this fact and thereby to undermine an important feature of the work.
>
> *(2013: 244)*

It is the responsibility of curatorial teams to participate in the displaying of the work by producing new configurations of its components each time it is exhibited.

In Caldarola (2020a), I develop on Irvin's account of the public's role in installation art, and argue, with reference to Berys Gaut's account of interactive art (2010: 141–3), that works of installation art are, usually, abstract individuals partially instantiated through their physical installations and completely instantiated through the public's experiences of such installations. In particular, I claim that the public *completes the works' displays* by interacting with them in the ways sanctioned by the artists through the rules of participation.

Ken Wilder (2020) also focuses on the role of the public in installation art, describing the public's engagement with these works in terms of both exploring literal spaces and engaging in imaginative acts prompted by such spaces, which often involve reflection on the socio-political conditions underlying the physical sites of the works.

In Caldarola (2020b), I argue that the space of the works and the experiences of the works' public constitute the medium profile of works installation art: they are what the public is supposed to focus on in order to appreciate such works – for a different approach to the debate on installation art's medium see Argüello Manresa (2020). The role of installation artworks' space is emphasized by Eleen Deprez (2020): she argues that *display* (i.e., the arrangement of objects in a space) and *site-responsiveness* (i.e., a work's property of being shaped by the space in which it is presented) are key meaning-conveying aspects of works of installation art.

To recap, available research has shown that works of installation art present us with spatial environments intended to be experienced from within, sometimes by performing specific actions, and that they show a remarkably relational character since they involve both the public and curatorial teams in the circumstances of their completion. In what follows (Sections 5 and 6), I shall show that the role of the public and of curatorial teams is also significant for an assessment of the improvisational character of some works of installation art. First (in Sections 3 and 4), however, I shall focus on improvisational aspects in the installation artist's activity and in works of installation art themselves.

3 The Artist as Improviser

OBRIST: To what extent are you improvising?

SZE: I gather materials in advance of the installation, but what you see is a result of time spent in a place. Once the materials are on location all decisions are improvised. Both meanings of the word "improvise" apply to the work: it is created "live" or extemporaneously, like jazz, and it is fabricated from what is conveniently on hand. (*Sze 2016a: 128*)

This is Sarah Sze describing her working style to Hans Ulrich Obrist in 1998. Sze's works are usually expansive sculptural installations largely composed of cheap, everyday items such as plastic pipes, plastic bottles, study lamps, newspaper sheets, plywood bars, tin cans, aspirin tablets, or small succulents (see, e.g., Figure 43.1). As Sze explains, she does not preconceive the structures of her works, but creates them on location; furthermore, to produce her installations she puts together "what is conveniently on hand" – which can be contrasted with an attitude of pondering the potentiality for the artistic expression of each everyday item composing the installation before adding it to the work. In a 2010 interview with Phong Bui, Sze explains that her work process greatly relies on the use of the glue gun, which allows her "to work and make decisions very quickly" (Sze 2016b: 140). As Sze herself suggests in the interview with Obrist, her attitude is similar to that of a jazz improviser: the work is conceived and produced at a specific time and in a specific location, and it's composed bit by bit.[3]

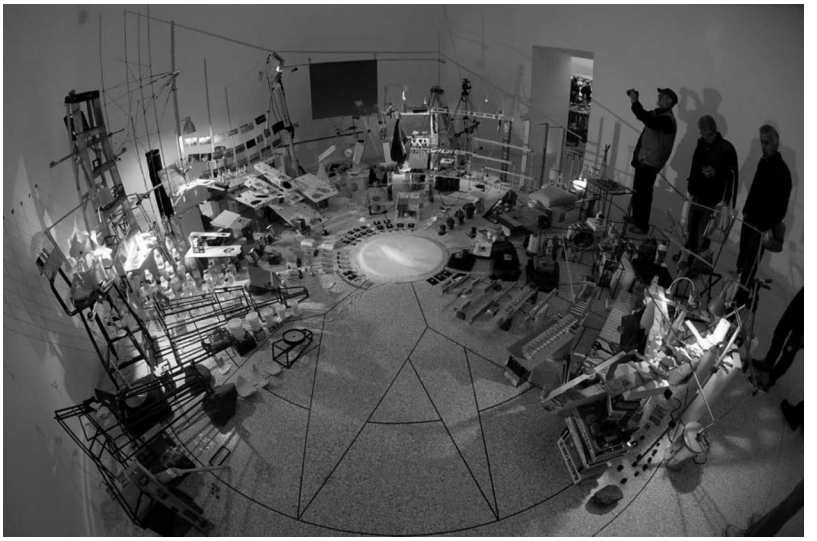

Figure 43.1 Sarah Sze, *Triple Point – Pendulum*, USA pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale 2013, Venice, Italy. Photo by Felix Hörhager, picture alliance/Getty Images.

Spontaneity, however, does not equal complete randomness, as Sze tells Jeffrey Kastner in a 2003 interview; in her work

> There's no right and wrong and not a lot of precedent, but everything is a decision, and the decisions are informed. I'm interested in objects that have a dual identity, that you might think of as being very mundane but that have a poetry to them on a very basic level.
>
> *(Sze 2016c: 134)*

That the 2003 claim about being "informed" of her decisions as to how to proceed in putting together her works does not contradict the 1998 claim that in her works she puts together "what is conveniently on hand" can be understood if we compare Sze's improvisational ability to that of other improvisers. As Aili Bresnahan points out, "[M]ost improvisation theorists agree that improvisation is not an ad hoc activity; rather, it involves skill, training, planning, limitations, and forethought" (2015: 574).[4] For instance, Matteo Plebani and Gabriele Tomasi claim about jazz improvisation that

> [t]he capacity to improvise depends on learning a wide range of rules and very specific and complex abilities. Musicians need knowledge of harmony and styles in order to master the voicing; besides this, they should have a mastery of the instrument that allows for automatism of movements as well as knowledge of the potentialities of its timbre. They should also have transformed these musical capacities or skills into a kind of habit that allows for free expression.
>
> *(Plebani and Tomasi 2016: 67–8)*[5]

Sze's capacity to improvise, analogous to the jazz musician's, depends on having learned how to use the glue gun very quickly (compare this with the "automatism of movements" of the jazz musician), having meditated on the distinct "poetic potential" of each kind of everyday object she employs in her installations (compare this with the jazz musician's knowledge of the expressive

potential of the timbre of her instrument), and having considered how the objects' "poetic potential" can be exploited by assembling different objects together (compare this with the jazz musician's skillful voicing of musical notes).

If artistic improvisation requires so much knowledge and skill, how does it differ from non-improvised artistic activities, then? According to Plebani and Tomasi, Wittgenstein's remarks on the relationship between a rule and its correct applications can help illuminate this issue (Plebani and Tomasi 2016: Section 1.1). Focusing on algorithms, which are sets of rules to be followed in a calculation and, in particular, thinking of someone who is familiar with the proposition expressing a certain algorithm and is applying the algorithm to a new case, Wittgenstein observes:

> […] we might ask: how does it happen that someone who now applies the general rule to a further number is still following this rule? How does it happen that no further rule was necessary to allow him to apply the general rule to this case in spite of the fact that this case was not mentioned in the general rule? And so we are puzzled that we can't bridge over this abyss between the individual numbers and the general proposition.
>
> *(Wittgenstein 1958 II, Ch. II, §10, 282)*

Wittgenstein reasons as follows: if any rule can be applied ad infinitum (imagine that the rule is "add 2") and if any rule has been applied only a finite number of times (imagine that the rule "add 2" has been applied only to the number 1000), then not all cases of application of a certain rule have been covered; there are always new cases (in our example, the rule hasn't been applied to any number other than 1000). Moreover, any finite pattern of application of a rule can be continued in an infinite number of ways (e.g., the pattern "1000, 1002" can be continued with "1004," but also, e.g., with "1005" or "1009").[6] Our past use of a rule, then, does not tell us how we should proceed in applying it to new cases. As Plebani and Tomasi comment:

> One cannot extrapolate from a finite pattern of the application of a rule the way in which to extend that rule to new cases, nor can we hope to fill the gap between a rule and its applications with other rules.
>
> *(Plebani and Tomasi 2016: 70)*

Wittgenstein famously concludes that each new case of application of a rule is a matter of getting "a new insight," that to follow a rule "a new decision […] [is] needed at every stage" (Wittgenstein 1958: 186). According to Wittgenstein, then, there is an interesting tension when we are confronted with a rule: on the one hand, from a logical viewpoint, we are absolutely free to follow whatever rule-application pattern we please, because neither the formulation of the rule itself nor our past behavior tells us how to proceed in applying it; on the other hand, however, we observe "a total uniformity of behavior from the anthropological point of view" (Frascolla 1994: 120) – rule-application practices are extremely consistent. Normally, when we are asked to apply the rule "add 2" we all continue a series such as "1000, 1002" with "1004, 1006, 1008" rather than with, for instance, "1007, 1011, 1015."

According to Plebani and Tomasi, no matter whether or not we agree with Wittgenstein's view on what happens when we apply algorithms, his remarks can help us understand what happens when a jazz musician is improvising.[7] From a logical viewpoint, a jazz musician who improvises is free to follow whatever pattern of behavior she likes. She can, for instance, break her instrument into tiny pieces or choose to play an instrument that produces only ultrasounds. However, the jazz musician finds herself in a situation similar to that of the person who is asked to add 2 to the number 1000 in Wittgenstein's picture of rule-following: just like the subject described by Wittgenstein has to continue the numerical series with "1002" in order to be understood by other members of her community as someone who is applying the "add 2" rule, the jazz musician has

to act in a certain way in order to be understood by other members of her community as someone who is performing a jazz improvisation. For instance, she has to voice musical notes, exploit the expressive potential of the timbre of a certain instrument, and play that instrument. When a jazz musician improvises, she is free to decide what to do, because the pattern of action she will follow cannot be pre-determined, but at the same time, she is following certain rules by deliberately adhering to certain social practices. In improvising, then, an artist follows rules that she has learned and interiorized through time, qua member of a community of improvising artists; however, she does not follow a plan, unlike in non-improvised artistic practices.[8]

Similar considerations apply to Sze's work process: from a logical viewpoint, at each new step, she is free to decide how to proceed in her installation work. However, from a behavioral viewpoint, her actions are the result of decisions to adhere to certain social practices concerning, for instance, how glue guns are to be used (i.e., choosing to glue one object onto another, rather than, say, to shoot glue in the air) and what kind of resemblance and expressive properties are attributed to objects presenting certain perceptual and historical properties within a certain culture (e.g., the aspects of resemblance that a group of standing plastic bottles bears to a group of trees or standing people, or the playfulness expressed by groups of similar, small plastic objects in primary colors) (see, e.g., Figure 43.1 above). Spontaneity in Sze's sculptural improvisation is a matter of making informed decisions about following certain social practices concerning the objects employed in the making of the works, while at the same time acting without following a plan for putting the works together.[9]

So far, I have argued that Sze's work practice is improvisational.[10] It is relevant to stress that such practice is not intended as a focus of appreciation for her public: we are not supposed to see Sze at work and appreciate her improvisational skills, but we are supposed to appreciate the static results of her improvisations: her works of installation art. In the next section, I shall argue that Sze's works are intended to be experienced both as traces of her improvisation practice and as representing and expressing improvisation.

4 Static Artworks and Improvisation

Sze's installation artworks are the result of an improvisation practice, as we have seen. My hypothesis is that they are also presented for appreciation as *records* of the improvised actions performed by their maker. Sze suggests this in a conversation with Okwui Enwezor:

> SZE: Ideally, I want the work to have the residue of improvisation, a sense that there's a planned event juxtaposed with gestures that could only be improvisational in the moment. Despite the fact that you're only witnessing inanimate objects, there's the strong sense of seeing an act in process, of witnessing behavior. (*Enwezor and Sze 2016: 16*)

Similarly, a 2013 interview with Rirkrit Tiravanija goes:

> TIRAVANIJA: You want people to feel the process of it? [i.e., of your work]
> SZE: Yes, and that the process has somehow stopped, although it could have continued. It's at that point between accruing and disintegrating, growing, and dying. (*Sze 2016d: 144*)

In a similar vein, Laura Hoptman claims that Sze's *Pendulum* – one of the parts of *Triple Point*, the large installation produced by Sze for the United States Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2013 (see Figure 43.1 above) – is to be experienced as a record of her work practice:

> In *Pendulum* groups of objects, or more accurately bits of objects, have been carefully arranged in pie-shaped quadrants that radiate out from a circular centre formed by a heap of bright,

> white salt. […] [Its] underlying structure is dependent upon a room-sized compass rose floor detail that is a feature of the space in which the work is sited. […] Sze choose not to complete the circle with her collections of objects, creating a gap that becomes a kind of viewing platform. Surrounded on three sides by the work, we see the whole as a series of concentric circles rather than as wedges perpendicular to the centre. In amongst the objects, we are able to look at each one closely, and to discover the elements as they reveal themselves one at a time. *This way of perceiving one object after another alludes to the manner in which the artist built the work by choosing each object and placing it with attention to its sequence and adjacencies.* Unlike the bird's-eye vantage, which offers the overview of the whole, this point of view *emphasizes both the processes of creating and perceiving the installation*.
>
> *(Hoptman 2016: 103, my italics)*

In sum, I suggest that Sze invites us to consider the juxtaposition of one object against another and the arrangement of objects in sequences as traces of the improvised actions she performed to compose her works. At times, members of the public make unauthorized additions of everyday objects to the works, for instance, placing a plastic bottle and glass on the extremity of one of Sze's sequences. This kind of behavior can be interpreted – at least when it's clear that the gesture was not meant as a form of criticism of the artist's work – as a sign of the public's desire to co-improvise with Sze, to take part into a jam-session with her, as it were.[11] Although Sze does not invite her public to co-improvise with her, and the public's additions are consequently removed, she invites her public to look at her work as at the result of an improvisation – and the fact that members of the public are tempted to extend her improvised gestures shows that they have accepted the artist's invitation.

In the remaining part of this section, I shall argue that Sze's works also *represent* improvisation and are *expressive* of an improvisational character. In her conversation with Enwezor, Sze says, of how she would like her works to look: "A work should be constantly in a state of flux in terms of how it exists in space, how it exists in time; it should be unclear whether it's in a process of becoming or a process of entropy" (Enwezor and Sze 2016: 16). Relatedly, in a 2011 interview with Melissa Chiu, Sze claims that the "idea that objects, like experiences, are ultimately fleeting, ephemeral, and located in a very specific moment – the idea of the anti-monumental – became interesting to me" (Sze 2016e: 143). Finally, in her 2010 interview with Bui, Sze explains the role of blue tape in her works (see, e.g., Figure 43.2 below):

> Blue tape is great. I mean, it's at once incredibly useful as a practical tool and also relates to the very idea of temporality, desperation, improvised construction. […] I intentionally use sketchy materials like blue tape that make you feel that if you pulled off a piece of blue tape a string would pop, and a cinderblock would follow. I call it a portable planetarium, but you can't imagine moving it an inch. You don't immediately know how it stays together. It feels like it's going to fall apart at any moment. It has a sense of demise. It has a sense that you don't know whether it's still in the process of being made or in the process of falling apart. Everything has the potential to be a sprung trap in the viewer's imagination, and one thing might lead to the next, causing the work to fall apart around them. It's a sense that the built world is incredibly fragile, is on the edge of ruin, and it's all potentially a set trap.
>
> *(Sze 2016b: 140)*

Sze's works are not, literally, "in a state of flux": they are static. When, then, the artist speaks of their processual, fleeting character, which they share with improvisations, she is suggesting that the works represent or somehow evoke fleeting situations, as improvisational ones do. One way in which Sze's works *represent* fleeting situations is by offering a depiction of a scene that looks

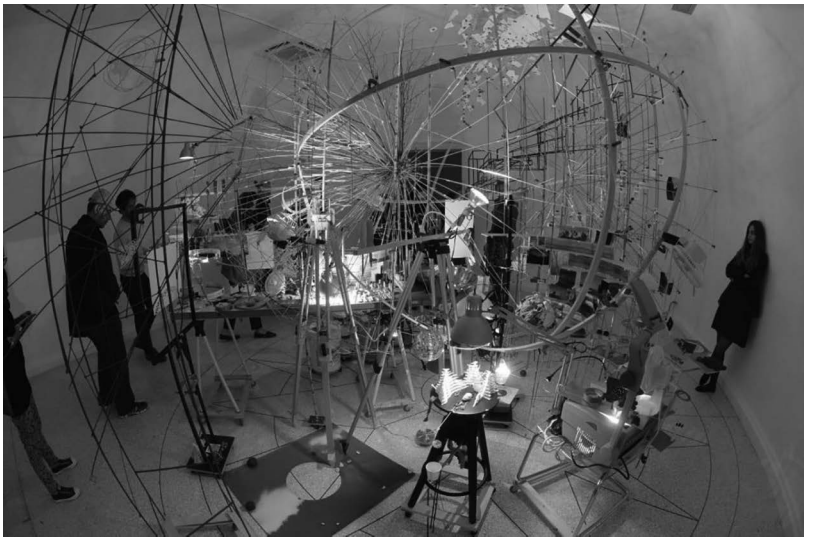

Figure 43.2 Sarah Sze, *Triple Point – Planetarium*, USA pavilion, 55th Venice Biennale 2013, Venice, Italy. Photo by Felix Hörhager, picture alliance/Getty Images.

like a frozen moment in a complex process (see, e.g., Figure 43.2 above), such as that of improvising a solo with a musical instrument, for instance. Another way in which her works represent fleeting situations is through their exemplification of certain properties. As Nelson Goodman and Catherine Elgin argue, an object exemplifies a property when it possesses it and is also used to refer to it (see Goodman 1976: 52–3; Elgin 1993: 15; Elgin 2011: 400; Elgin 2018: 29–31). For instance, a swatch of yellow cloth possesses the property "being yellow" and is also used to refer it. Similarly, in Sze's works we see a variety of objects and conglomerates of objects possessing properties that they are also used to refer back to – as we can infer from the artist's statements – such as "being ephemeral" (e.g., the elaborate structures realized by juxtaposing bars of plywood that a gust of wind could blow away – see Figure 43.2 above) and "being transient" (e.g., the decomposable materials such as aspirin tablets and small succulents – see Figure 43.1 above). Finally, Sze's works are also expressive of an improvisational character, as I shall explain. According to Goodman (1976: 50–1) and Elgin (1993: 16, 24), an object metaphorically possesses a certain property when it exemplifies a property that, metaphorically, expresses a certain character, within a certain context. The property "being gray," for instance, is often metaphorically linked with sadness. Now, as Sze explains to Bui, blue tape is an element of her works that "relates to the very idea of temporality, desperation, improvised construction." This, I believe, is due to the fact that Sze uses blue tape *to express* temporality and desperation as well as *to exemplify* improvised construction. As for the latter, when two things are kept together by blue tape, their connection often possesses properties such as being unstable and improvised; Sze, then, uses objects connected by blue tape to exemplify such properties (see, e.g., Figure 43.2 above). As for temporality and desperation, my view is that blue tape can express such properties because it possesses the property of connecting objects in an unstable manner (see again Figure 43.2 above). Instability can metaphorize temporality (the underlying idea being, roughly, that just like an object can easily change its position in space it can also easily change its position in time), as well as desperation (the underlying idea being, roughly, that just like an unstable object is at risk of falling apart physically a desperate person is at risk of having a mental breakdown). The expression of temporality and desperation is, again, suggestive of improvisation, broadly understood: performative improvisation is a process that develops in

time and, outside the realm of art, it can characterize, for instance, the lifestyle of someone who is forced to live day-to-day, by way of gimmicks, and feels desperate about her predicament – but keep in mind the distinction between deliberately improvised actions that take place in the art realm, and (usually) non-deliberate, reactive improvisation, which takes place in everyday life.

To sum up, in this section, I have shown, with reference to Sze's works, that works of installation art can be presented for appreciation as *results* of an improvisational practice, as *representing* an improvised situation, as *exemplifying* improvisation, and as *expressive* of improvisation.

5 The Public as Improviser

All works of installation art are interactive, but interactivity is a matter of degree. At a minimum, the public is required to step into the space of the work, in order to experience it properly qua work of installation art. On the opposite side of the spectrum, there are *participatory* works of installation art, where the public is required to perform certain actions within the space of the work, in order to experience it properly.

As we have seen (Section 2), Sherri Irvin (forthcoming: Ch. 4) calls "rules for participation" the instructions given by artists to the public in participatory works. Rules for participation, too, are a matter of degree. In some cases, they are very specific; according to Irvin's description of the work, for instance, Adrian Piper's *The Probable Trust Registry: The Rules of the Game #1–3* (2013) invites audience members to sign agreements, committing themselves to one or more of the following three statements:

1 I will always be too expensive to buy.
2 I will always mean what I say.
3 I will always do what I say I am going to do.

> The installation consists of three attended kiosks, one for each statement. Audience members can converse with the agent if they wish and then choose whether or not to electronically sign a contract committing them to complying with the statement. The signatures are to be archived by the Adrian Piper Research Archive Foundation Berlin (APRA Foundation Berlin) for 100 years, and each signatory will receive the Personal Declarations of all others who have signed. If one signatory wishes to contact another, they can contact the gallery or exhibiting collector and request contact information (released only with the other signatory's consent). Thus, the commitment has an element of public accountability.
>
> *(Irvin, forthcoming)*[12]

The role of the participant in Piper's work can be compared to that of a musician executing a score, or an actor reciting a script.

Often, rules for participation require the public to perform quite specific actions, albeit allowing for a certain degree of freedom in their execution. In Eva Frapiccini's *Dreams' Time Capsule* (2011 – in progress), for instance, members of the public encounter an inflatable structure, similar to a hot-air balloon, but anchored to the ground, and are invited to enter it one by one and recount a dream, which is then recorded inside the structure.[13] Members of the public are free to choose, for example, which dream to talk about, what idiom to use, what tone of voice to adopt, but the kind of action they are invited to perform is established in advance by the artist. Members of the public can be compared to actors who improvise on a certain theme. Like an actor improvising, e.g., on the theme "at the bus station," *Dreams' Time Capsule* participants improvise on the theme "tell a dream."

In other cases, rules for participation give participants a lot more freedom: they are encouraged to engage in projects of their own, within the space of the work and through the means

offered by it. For instance, the installation *Reaction Machine* (2005), by Jonas Hansen and Klaas Jan Mollema, invites participants to sit on a chair in front of a TV screen. In the screen, participants see themselves (because they are being filmed while sitting in front of the TV) looking at another person (who is the participant that preceded them in experiencing the installation and was video-recorded while experiencing it) (Jacucci et al. 2010: 7).[14] Participants are also given a handle: by turning it, they can record a video of themselves. Once participants start exploring the use of the machine, they soon discover that they can record themselves and come to understand that the other person they see on the screen is another participant who has previously recorded herself. At this point, participants are free to record themselves performing whatever action they please, assuming whatever facial expression they please, etc. In other words, they are given the freedom to improvise in front of the camera. Thus, they can be compared to actors who are freely improvising on a stage.

Are the participants' improvisations in *Dreams' Time Capsule* and *Reaction Machine* intended by the artists to constitute aspects of their works that are offered to the public to be appreciated as art? It depends. On the one hand, it seems that the point of both works is to provide opportunities for participants to have certain experiences and reflect upon them: *Dreams' Time Capsule*'s participants are invited to think about what their dreams are, select a dream that they wish to recount, enter, with some difficulty, the work's space (the artist has deliberately made physical access to the work difficult by providing the inflatable structure with a door that only opens diagonally), and experience how it feels to say one's thoughts out loud, albeit in a protected environment, with no listeners. The dreams are recorded and the recording is sealed by the artist. Ten years after the recording, the artist sends back to each participant their respective recording by email. No one, then, is allowed to listen to any of the recorded dreams, apart from the respective dreamer. At the same time, a non-accessible, constantly evolving archive of recorded dreams is put together by the artist. Moreover, participants are aware that, even if their dreams are kept private, they are taking part in a project along with thousands of other people across various continents. *Reaction Machine*'s participants are invited to think about how they wish to be seen on screen by other participants of the installation, about what kind of "message" they would like to leave, and are given an opportunity to experience how it feels to be performing freely in front of a camera. It seems, then, that both works are presented for the appreciation *of the artists' projects* they realize. *Dreams' Time Capsule* realizes the projects of providing a space for the participants to get in touch with themselves through dream-telling, of providing an opportunity for each dreamer to be reminded of her dreams ten years down the line, and of putting together an intangible and inaccessible archive of dreams – a highly evocative kind of object. *Reaction Machine* realizes the project of providing a space for the participants to reflect on how they are seen by others, how they want to be seen, and what kind of message they want to leave for others. On the other hand, while in Frapiccini's work the public is not allowed access either to the (other) dreamers' dream-telling improvisations or to the recordings of their improvisations,[15] in Hansen's and Mollema's work each participant's improvisation is part of how another participant will experience the work. Moreover, with their improvised actions, participants can make the experience of the work more or less boring, engaging, entertaining, insightful, etc. In the latter case, then, appreciation of the participants' improvisations can constitute a significant portion of the appreciative experience of *Reaction Machine* as the work of art it is.

To sum up, in this section, I have argued that the public of participatory works of installation art is sometimes asked to engage in improvisation, both of the free kind and on a specific theme. In some cases, the participants' improvisations contribute significantly to the aspects of the work that are presented to the public for the appreciation of it as an artwork.

6 The Curatorial Team as Improviser?

As Irvin (forthcoming: Ch. 2, see also Section 2 above) argues, a distinctive feature of many works of contemporary art, including certain works of installation art, is that they are partly constituted by rules concerning how they should be displayed. Here's one vivid example from Irvin to illustrate the point:

> Zhan Wang's (2006) *Urban Landscape: Beijing* involves hundreds of stainless steel kitchen implements. Zhan did not fabricate these implements; his artmaking activity involved selecting them and devising an arrangement that cleverly represents Beijing. Clearly, correct configuration is crucial to the work, which otherwise would be just a collection of pots and pans. If a museum receives all the kitchen implements that are needed to construct a display of *Urban Landscape: Beijing* but lacks rules about how to arrange the implements, they don't yet "have" the work.
>
> *(Irvin, forthcoming)*

A museum's or exhibition space's curatorial team is usually responsible for liaising with artists and putting together the displays of their works. As Irvin shows, sometimes artists deliberately leave curatorial teams free to decide how to install their works and encourage them to experiment with the displays: this is the case, for instance, with El Anatsui's wall-hang sculptural installations, which are made mainly out of liquor bottle caps connected with copper wire (Irvin, forthcoming). Not only the artist does not specify particular rules about how to hang the works, but he explicitly states that installers can freely decide how to display them (see McCrickard 2006; Binder 2010, and Vogel 2012 in Irvin, forthcoming). Furthermore, Anatsui collaborates with studio assistants to produce his sculptures and often allows assistants a significant degree of freedom in choosing the visual effects and assemblage techniques for the works. As Irvin remarks, "[I]t is perhaps natural that the constitution of displays should be seen as a collaborative project as well" (Irvin, forthcoming). I suggest that we can conclude, then, that Anatsui allows curatorial teams to improvise, if they so wish, on what we could call the theme of "how to display El Anatsui's work." Curatorial teams are free to decide what to do when confronted with Anatsui's works; in particular, they can either make a plan and follow it or improvise without a plan. I suspect that Anatsui would appreciate improvised installations of his work, because they would suit what he calls his "nomadic aesthetic," which

> is about the fluidity of ideas and impermanence of form, indeterminacy, as well as giving others the freedom, or better still, the authority to try their hands at forming what the artist has provided as a starting point, a datum.
>
> *(McCrickard 2006, n.p. in Irvin, forthcoming)*

7 Conclusion

I have argued that installation art can incorporate improvisational elements at various levels: artists can improvise while producing works of installation art, installation artworks can be records of improvised actions, depict improvised processes, exemplify improvisation and express an improvised character, the public of participatory works of installation art can be required to engage in improvisations, and curatorial teams responsible for creating displays of works of installation art can be given the freedom to improvise while installing those works. Like in music and the performative arts, then, there is significant room for experimenting with improvisation in installation art.[16]

Notes

1 For an introduction to improvisation in the arts see Bresnahan (2015). On improvisation in painting see Gilmour (2000), Sawyer (2000), Sansom (2001), Colaizzi (2007). On improvisation in cinema see Wexman (1980) and Sterrit (2000).
2 The main references are, to my knowledge, Rebentisch (2012); Irvin (2013 and forthcoming); Argüello Manresa (2020); Caldarola (2020a and 2020b); Deprez (2020); Wilder (2020).
3 In a conversation with Okwui Enwezor, Sze declares: "I'm […] interested in the idea that film can be a sculpture, a drawing can be a sculpture, *music can be sculpture*" (Enwezor and Sze 2016: 24, my italics).
4 Bresnahan refers to Alperson (1984), Bitz (1998), Bresnahan (2014), Brown (2000), Clemente (1990), Hamilton (2000), Kernfeld (2002), Sterritt (2000), and Zaunbrecher (2011).
5 Plebani and Tomasi support their claims with reference to statements by saxophonists Ornette Coleman and Steve Lacy (2016: 66, 68). The importance of various forms of training for jazz improvisation is often stressed in the literature (see for instance Bailey 1993: 109–11; Berliner 1994: chap. 2).
6 See Wittgenstein (1958: 185).
7 It is beyond the scope of this chapter to assess whether we can extract a coherent view from Wittgenstein's rule-following considerations. The debate on this topic is immense; for a survey see Kutsch (2010).
8 A further dimension of the intertwinement between norms, freedom, and improvisation is highlighted by Bertinetto and Bertram (2020): while, following Plebani and Tomasi (2016), I have pointed out that artistic improvisation requires adhering to certain social practices (i.e., following rules, as opposed to acting in conformity with a plan), which allow for a certain degree of freedom in the artist's behavior, Bertinetto and Bertram focus on the elements of innovation that the artist brings to the improvised performance, arguing – among other things – that, to improvise, one needs to develop a sensitivity for contextual affordances that allow one to perform unexpected actions. According to their account, what strikes us as the free character of improvisation emerges from careful attention to norms grounded in the affordances of the context.
9 Contrast this with, for example, the installation produced by the artist duo formed by Peter Fischli and David Weiss for their film *The Way Things Go* (1987): the artists put together a large installation of everyday objects, meticulously arranged in states of impending collapse, in order to film sequences showing the objects being involved in complex chain reactions.
10 See Buchloh (2016) for an overview of contemporary artists who have influenced Sze's practice.
11 On the significance of unauthorized additions to Sze's works see Irvin (forthcoming).
12 See http://www.adrianpiper.com/art/The_Probable_Trust_Registry.shtml (accessed July 14, 2020).
13 Here you can find pictures of the work: http://www.evafrapiccini.it/dreams-time-capsule/ (accessed July 14, 2020).
14 For pictures of the work see https://pixelsix.net/reaction-machine/ (accessed July 14, 2020).
15 More precisely, Frappiccini sends back to each participant the recording of her improvisation ten years after it took place.
16 The author would like to thank Sherri Irvin for allowing her access to her forthcoming volume.

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44
INSTALLED IMPROVISATION
The Case of Erwin Redl

Edgar Landgraf

Layers of time simultaneously ticking.
Motion on top of motion.
Patterns within patterns.
Perception perceived.
(Redl 2017)

1 Improvisation and the Visual Arts

The first place where one would want to look for improvisation in the visual arts is performance art. Think Dada, Jackson Pollock, Joseph Beuys, or whomever you consider to be your favorite performance artist, and chances are you will find them improvising as they perform their craft. That is, they will adhere to what is readily recognized as improvisation in the arts by staging the seemingly unplanned, ad hoc, and "free" (following no rules) creation of art in front of a live audience. But while performance art might be the obvious place to begin for a cultural-historical study of improvisation in the visual arts, it is less productive for a philosophical reflection on improvisation and the visual arts. Not because the obvious is often the hardest to analyze; it is rather the case that the most common parameters used to identify improvisation do not hold up to philosophical scrutiny. Critical improvisation studies has shown amply in recent years how reductive the four parameters are that guide the popular perception of improvisation in the West (Lewis and Piekut 2016).[1] Improvisation cannot be completely divorced from planning just as much as the non-improvisational arts cannot plan for everything all the time. Likewise, the temporal structure of improvisation is neither necessarily devoid of repetition, nor is the moment (let alone the idea of being "in-the-moment") an easily definable measure. Improvisation is also never fully free from any constraints, structure, rules (e.g., the rules it needs so it can break them), nor is it free to do anything. Even a self-proclaimed unbound artform such as free jazz is restricted by a cultural and musical context, which prohibits, for example, that a performance appears to follow a blueprint or otherwise seem predictable. And while improvisation is almost always approached as a performance art, the category of the "performative" has also been rethought and decoupled from the requirement of the physical presence of an audience (Landgraf 2018). While experienced performers are able to tune out the presence of the audience before them, artists who work in the lonely confines of their studio (and, like Cézanne or Kandinsky, might openly draw on improvisational practices during the creative process[2]) never fully escape the presence of an audience. It is

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present as an imagined future audience and through the persona of the artist herself who, during the production process, is bound to make judgements, to value and assess the emerging work, and thereby to apply standards that were formed not in a solipsistic vacuum, but in response to the artist's particular social, cultural, and aesthetic context.

It is, thus, perhaps not as far-flung as it first seems that the following contribution, which is committed to engage improvisation in the visual arts, will not turn to performance art, but instead to installation art, a contemporary visual art form that is, at first glance, about as far removed from the performance aspects of improvisation as one might imagine. Installation art requires extensive planning and demands great technical and engineering knowledge. It involves blueprints (architectural and for circuit boards), coordination with suppliers and manufacturers from around the world, and takes weeks, months, sometimes even years to build. In its architectural rigidity, installation art is bound to appear anything but fleeting (another typical yet problematic expectation attached to improvisation, see e.g., Bailey 1993). Erwin Redl, the Austrian-born, US-based contemporary artist on whose work I will focus specifically in this chapter, neither performs nor stages the production process of his light installations; nor does he conceive his work *toto coelo* as improvised.[3] Nevertheless, I will argue that Redl's work and, more generally, site-specific art constitute a form of *installed improvisation* that shares important features with performed improvisation. Furthermore, the fact that installation art is not performed opens up different vistas on improvisation. In particular, it invites a reflection of their shared phenomenology – *how* installed and performed improvisation engage the observer or participant spatially, temporally, cognitively, and even socially.

To make the argument, I will draw on recent discussions in new materialist and postphenomenological philosophy that "introduce materiality, along with its complex interactions, into humanities discourses" (Hayles 2017: 181). Postphenomenologists like Don Ihde or Peter-Paul Verbeek aim to describe how "technological artifacts mediate the relation between humans and their world, amongst human beings, and between humans and technology itself" (Verbeek 2005: 11).[4] Ihde and Verbeek build on, but also depart from, Martin Heidegger's work.[5] For our purposes, Heidegger offers an interesting foil, as installation art brings together what in the German philosopher's writings constitutes an essential opposition, namely technology and art. In a nutshell, for Heidegger modern technology discloses the real – objects, nature, and by extension, human beings – as "enframing" and "standing-reserve," something that is reduced to its use value.[6] For example, in the techno-scientific realm, a tree appears neither as a symbol of life, an expression of rootedness, heritage, and lineage, nor as connecting earth and sky, but merely as potential lumber. While art shares with technology that it is produced by human beings, it discloses the world in a fundamentally different way. Art decouples what it represents – Heidegger famously discusses one of van Gogh's paintings of a pair of rustic shoes – from its use value. Van Gogh's painting discloses shoes neither as standing-reserve, nor merely as present-at-hand objects (as "vorhanden"), but they unconceal what Heidegger sees as the essence of art. Ian Thompson summarizes this essence as "the essential tension between revealing and concealing, 'earth' and 'world,' which is at work in all *art*" and which "no longer conceives everything we encounter as inherently meaningless objects to be mastered or resources to be optimized, but instead helps us learn to discern and develop creatively the inherent meanings of things and others" (Thompson 2011: 104).

What happens to the opposition between art and technology when art itself becomes ostensibly technological? Does such art still, as Heidegger suggests in the conclusion to his essay on "The Question Concerning Technology," allow for the "[e]ssential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it" (Heidegger 1977: 35)? Heidegger's privileging of art over technology is further complicated by the fact that his understanding of art is based primarily on a modernist art that is still representational (e.g., a painting of rustic shoes). Heidegger is known for having rebuked 20th-century abstract art for being essentially metaphysical and for having

its legitimate function in the realm of the techno-scientific construction of the world. Although Ingvild Torsen, in a recent article, was able to show that Heidegger's stance toward abstract art becomes more intricate in his later writings,[7] the question remains how the dichotomy Heidegger sets up between art and technology applies to an art form that is both abstract and uses technology in sophisticated ways. While the purpose of this essay is not to renegotiate Heidegger's thinking on art – and certainly not to subscribe to what Adorno called Heidegger's "jargon of authenticity" (Adorno 1973)[8] – I hope to make Heidegger's distinction between art and technology productive for a postphenomenological reflection of installation art and improvisation. My goal is to draw on postphenomenology to shift the focus away from the performative and toward a contemplation of how improvisation "unconceals" underlying materialities, including the primary medium of the visual arts, light, as well as reflect on the existential dimension of installations and improvisation, how both mediate how we connect to and experience ourselves in relation to artistically shaped surroundings. The point of this approach is not to presuppose inherent notions of materiality or of space and time, but to contemplate the specific ways in which installation art and improvisation disclose the material and space and time, that is, how we experience them differently in relation to these artforms as opposed to the way they are mediated by science, by digital imagery, or in our everyday (in)attentive encounters with them.

2 Erwin Redl's Light Installations

Erwin Redl is best known for his large-scale light installations.[9] He specializes in arrays or grids of dots, lines, and curtains of LED lights that form what he calls "matrixes" when they are not animated, and "fades," "fetches," "waves," or "speed-shifts" when they are animated. Despite the large scale of most of his installations, Redl pursues a minimalist aesthetics. He prefers clear and simple lines, monochrome patterns, transparent and flat materials (glass, metal, strings), and simple fixtures, hiding – for the most part – the wires and technologies that drive his installations. Influenced by the clean aesthetics of Fred Sandback, Redl's use of LED lights give the lines and matrixes a sharp and precisely defined look, which is mellowed, however, by the feint halos that form around the lights and, where animated, by programs that create smooth transitions in brightness and color.

Redl's minimalist philosophy extends to his creative approach. Half his artistic work, Redl suggests, is about "*not* doing stuff… stripping away… shaving off" (Redl 2019c); the other half of his creative attention is focused on finding aesthetically interesting arrangements, patterns, animations, the "right" colors, brightness, transitions, and so on. He programs circuit boards and computer chips to create different effects. "Fades," for example, are arrays that change in brightness or color, "fetches" move toward or draw the observer into the spaces they create, "speed-shifts" are arrays where light travels in slightly asynchronous ways parallel or counter to each other, "shades" play on changing contrasts, and so on. His animations create flows and ebbs, parallel and counter movements, predictable and unpredictable interactions between individual lights and colors or between lights and the reflections and shades they produce.

In tune with many forms of performed improvisation, Redl's programming of the illumination patterns aims for the appearance of what he calls "controlled randomness" (Redl 2019c). That is, despite the digital clarity and seeming linearity of his installations, they are animated in ways that make them appear ever so slightly skewed, asynchronous, and unpredictable. With reference to the effects of wind disturbing the symmetry of his outdoor installation *Whiteout*, Lawrence Weschler quotes Redl as commenting: "After one's taken every effort to render the grid to perfection, you want things to start sliding away, moving about on their own, unexpectedly, imperfectly. That means they're alive!" (Redl 2017: 41). Like in performed or musical improvisation, much of the aesthetic allure of his installations derives from sustaining tensions, from simultaneously asserting

stability and change, harmony and disharmony, order and chaos. While his computer programs do not employ random algorithms – he says he is leery about randomness becoming a fetish and finds randomness programs aesthetically wanting – subtle differences and tensions in the programmed movements of his lights make Redl's minimalist art nevertheless complex enough that they appear to be unpredictable, *im-pro-visio* in the literal sense.

3 Art After the Digital Experience

Redl sees his work as reflecting "art making after the 'digital experience'" (Redl 2020). The preposition "after" suggests a departure as well as continuities and links to the digital. Redl's art is not nostalgic, rather it acknowledges that there is no way back, that the digital has irreparably changed how we view and experience art and our surroundings. Indeed, Redl's installations accentuate and magnify the distinctive character of digital imagery. But while he employs the capacity of digital processes and light technologies – their ability, as Crowther puts it, "to define forms with hyperclarity and sharpness, and […] to blend forms in masses with unparalleled smoothness, nuance, and at levels of the utmost visual complexity" (Crowther 2008: 163) – Redl also defies the aesthetics of digital art by translating "the language of virtual reality and 3-D computer modeling back into architectural environments" (Redl 2020). Installations such as "Matrix XII Krems" from 2019, "Matrix Paris" from 2018, or "Twists and Turns" from 2014 (Redl 2020) transform the two-dimensionality and essential immateriality of our everyday digital experience back into three- and four-dimensionalities, re-materializing the aesthetics of our digital age. In this way, Redl's installations oppose virtual realities with real spaces: material places that are physically accessible by the visitors, or that physically surround them. While Redl's installations are also aesthetically pleasing when viewed on a computer screen, images or videos of his work fail to capture how they surround and respond to the physical presence of the visitor (Figure 44.1).[10]

Redl understands his installations not as objects, but as systems. He is interested in what happens between objects, in "the system in which they are embedded" and the "invisible, ephemeral connections" (Redl 2019c) between objects that make up the system. With Gregory Bateson we might say, it is the differences that make a difference that are of interest (see 1972: 460).[11] Such

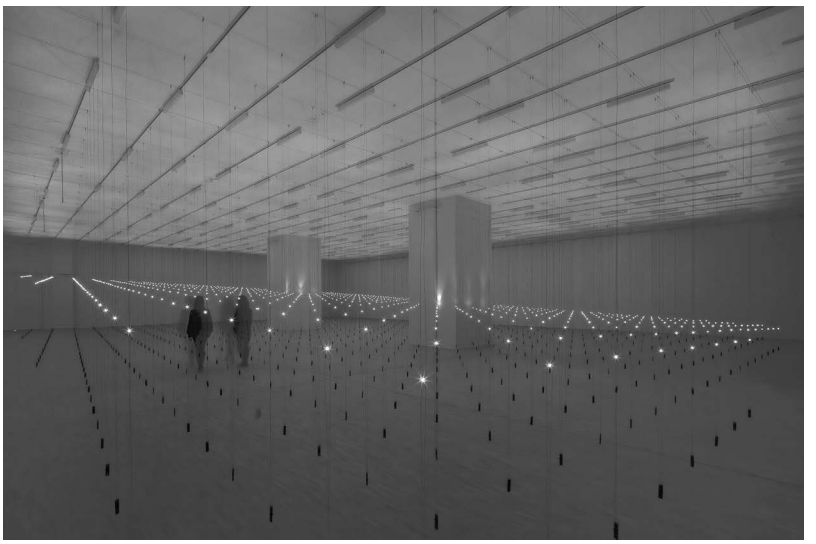

Figure 44.1 Erwin Redl, *Matrix XII Krems*, 2019. Light Installation with blue LEDs, State Gallery of Lower Austria, Krems, Austria. Photograph by LOPXP!X.

differences are not inherent to the objects, lights, lines, or angles per se, but only emerge in the relation between them, by contrasting, comparing, and connecting them to each other.

Because they are systems, Redl's installations engage the observer differently than objects or framed works of art. The installation serves not as an object of contemplation, but as an environment that needs to be physically explored and experienced. The observer is no longer a passive consumer, but as he or she enters and moves around the installation, the installation constantly changes. With each step, with each movement of the body, head, or eyes, the installation appears differently: differently lit, differently shaded, differently proportioned, with different angles. Far from being a static object, the installation comes alive. Angles expand or contract, revealing new spaces, new connections, new grid formations, new flows and so on. In the process, the system enlivens the visitor. Visitors no longer function as cool outsiders who are put in a detached and supposedly privileged position from where to fix and judge the work, construing the general from the particular and the particular from the general, as idealized in Kantian aesthetics. Rather, as they become part of the assemblage of lights, the observers assume a paradoxical position vis-à-vis the installation, one of simultaneous in- and exclusion, of simultaneous contemplation and participation. That is, visitors are able to experience the constructive role of their own observing where they allow themselves to be guided by the work, but at the same time play an active part in defining angles, relations, transitions, and so on. In this regard, visiting an installation is a participatory event not unlike other forms of improvisation that invite the input of the audience. Both turn passive observers into active contributors who for the moment can experience themselves at least partially as artists.

The phenomenology of Redl's installations, that is, the specific way in which they engage the observer in their presence, is further defined by their nature as abstract art. Abstract art is self-reflexive. It does not represent something outside of itself, does not reference imagined objects, faces, buildings, or landscapes, but points toward itself, toward the particular hues, shades, transitions, angles, colors, spaces and so on that it discloses. Abstract art engages the observer accordingly: what matters is the here and now and hence their presence, their momentary sensory experience, not an anterior or lasting meaning or other message that is to be found beyond the work. This phenomenological quality installation art again shares with performed improvisation. While performed improvisations can, of course, also be representational, carry a political message, make an aesthetic statement, or be educational, the specific experience that performed improvisations offer is in large part due to their ability to draw the attention of their audience to the here and now. In other words, installations share with performed improvisations the feature that they draw the attention to the space, lights, colors, sounds, movements, activities, and so on that form or occur at a particular place, at a particular time, and in relation to the position, movement and attention of the particular audience that they engage.

4 Mediations of Materiality

Let's dwell for a moment on this shared phenomenology. What in particular is highlighted when primarily the "present" matters, rather than a deeper, but absent meaning or the representation of a past or future thing or use that is equally absent? I want to underscore two features installation art shares with performed improvisation, namely their site-specificity and how they make appear the materiality of the work or performance. In a recent article on "Improvisation as Contingent Encounter," Dan DiPiero expands on improvisation's often noted link to contingency, arguing that "improvisation, when considered as a contingent encounter, is *always* a singularity" (2018: 5). Singularity here is meant in the Deleuzian sense, not as the opposite to the universal, the general, or the statutory (as Derrida 1989: 45 put it), but as the uncanny supplement that accompanies, haunts, but also enables generality in the first place. "There are always general conditions that are

reproduced from event to event; but these generalities never exist without singularities as well, no repetition without difference" (DiPiero 2018: 5). It is important to understand that this "radical contingency" is a necessary structural property that defines the ontology of improvisation: "Contingency in this view would be the necessary but nevertheless empty foundation of improvisation, upon which the context-specific details can play out" (2018: 7). If we put this in postphenomenological terms, what DiPiero argues is that improvisation reveals the singularity in any generality, how in each instance, how each improvisation, how with each repetition of its general structure improvisation reveals also the singularity, uniqueness, and non-generality of the event.[12]

It is not necessary to dwell on the intricacies of the connections and differences between Heidegger and Deleuze or Derrida, who makes a similar argument negotiating the conditions of iterability (Landgraf 2011). Drawing on this philosophical tradition allows us to understand improvisation as a practice that is linked to and makes appear what is particular, singular, unique, and materially constitutive. DiPiero discusses "Waves, Linens, and White Light," a highly repetitive improvised track by the Swedish/Norwegian duo Left Exit, Mr. K, consisting of Karl Hjalmar Nyberg (saxophones/clarinet) and Andreas Skår Winther (drums), to illustrate this point. The tune's repetitiveness draws the attention toward the medium itself, the particular sounds produced by the particular instruments that are being used in a particular setting. "[T]hrough the physicality of the specific instruments – the fact that wind instruments must be blown, the fact that the bass bow is only so long – we hear in each re-articulation the physicality of the notes themselves" (DiPiero 2018: 8). The example is, of course, not innocent. "Waves, Linens, and White Light" is a highly abstract piece of improvised music that proceeds iteratively in a way that emphasizes its self-reflexivity. Precisely because it accentuates self-reflexivity, the tune reveals something essential about the phenomenology of improvisation, how improvisation is able to draw the attention toward the work's contingent materiality (here the materiality of the instruments played) and even toward the materiality of the medium (here the subtle changes in sound that occur between each iteration).

Redl notes that he was influenced by groups like the experimental Australian trio The Necks, the noise music of Borbetomagus, and the British improvisation group AMM that explore the material quality of improvisation along these lines. In an analogous fashion, Redl's highly structured and iterative artworks disclose their underlying physicality and in particular, what we might call the materiality of light. On the surface, it might seem contradictory to speak of the materiality of media such as sound or light. In both cases, however, we can observe sound and light not as vehicles that give expression to a particular form (a musical form or an image), but what comes into view is the dependence of the medium on the material from which it emanates (the musical instrument, the light source) and where it resonates, i.e., the walls, objects, and bodies that reflect and refracture in the fore- and background sound or light in particular ways. Phenomenologically, then, abstract installations share with performed improvisations the feature that they reveal the singularity and, thus, the specificity and relevance of the materials used, of the medium, and of the surroundings of the artwork or performance.

But what precisely is the "materiality" that Redl's immaterial light installations disclose? As with the sounds of an instrument, recognizing the materiality firstly means to experience the particular qualities, tones, strength, flicker, subtle changes in color, cohesion, movement, and so on, the subtle nuances that appear despite and because of the use of hyperclean LED lights. These appearances always already happen against a background of that which is concealed by the brightness of the light, be it what cannot be seen behind or because of the light, or because of the shades the light projects onto surrounding objects or walls. In this regard, Redl's installations produce a heightened state of sensibility while also making the limits of the sensible appear – what light conceals in its very appearance. Some of the awe that visitors of Redl's light installations experience, along with their mysterious aura, to use Benjamin's well-known term for this effect (Benjamin 1969), might be explained in terms of their ability to simultaneously disclose what appears and

what remains concealed and, thus, to reveal something akin to what religious artifacts or spaces promise: a sense of the immanence of the transcendent.[13]

Secondly, Redl's ephemeral light installations are interesting from a postphenomenological approach because of how they make the interior negative space appear. His installations are neither two-dimensional representations of space, nor are they decorations on an empty container, but they create and bring to the fore the appearance of distances and proximities. In his installations, the system makes appear the voids that form in-between and in relation to the dots, lines, and grids of light. Space acquires depth through the movement of light through the grids and the shades these lights project onto their surroundings. As with the materiality of light, the simultaneity of revealing and concealing is important here. What defines the perception of proximity and depth is linked to simple distinctions between foreground and background, content and container, center and periphery, corners, lines, and planes. As we noted above, Redl's installations do not fix, but play with these distinctions and the relations they form. They make appear the mutual dependence and reversibility of sides and angels, allowing for a playful back-and-forth between them that opens up new perspectives, new arrangements, new shapes of the grids and in-between voids.

Crowther suggests that "the enhanced modal plasticity of digital imaging […] has the power to virtually reconfigure the real in transcausal terms, and to do this in a sustained and ever-transforming way [generating] an aesthetic of the quasi-magical" (Crowther 2008: 167). Redl's installations translate the "quasi-magical" aesthetics of digital imagery, their aura, into 3D spaces. They are *magically real* in as much as they do not merely fill or adorn a place, nor do they appear as the abstract container of the techno-scientific imagination, instead, they constitute their own real places, places that connect and separate, gather and distribute, are closed and open. Constructed ostensibly out of light, Redl's places are strangely ephemeral and material, virtual and real, space and place at the same time. His large-scale matrixes also stand out for their lack of grounding. They are not built on a solid and seemingly impenetrable, cognitively inaccessible foundation, but installations like *Whiteout* and *Floating in Silence* are suspended and self-sufficient (Redl 2020). We might link this lack of grounding again to a feature of performed improvisations that define and redefine the surroundings in which they take place. In both cases, the lack of fixity and grounding discloses space as an emergent phenomenon, as defined by the relations between lines, shapes, and angles, but also by the objects, things, and people it gathers. In both, space appears as that which offers areas of openness, exploration, and potential habitation, gathering and connecting objects and people. Both reveal the convergence of the material with the "social production of space" (Lefebvre 1991).

5 Playing the Marlin

In performed improvisation, it is the simultaneity of composition and performance that ties improvisation to a particular place and thus makes it possible for the creative process to involve the contingencies of place. In fact, one of the special draws of performed improvisation is its ability to engage and, thus, highlight the singularity of their surroundings. An improvising drummer might decide to leave the confines of the drum set and wander around using whatever objects present themselves in the vicinity to explore their sound quality and rhythmic potential.[14] Similarly, Improv actors, rather than relying on a stage set, might decide to work with the particular place they are in, spontaneously fashioning and refashioning more or less random features, objects, or people they encounter on and off stage (Sawyer 2003). The place thus becomes part of the performance. More precisely, place and performance mutually affect each other. The performance reacts to and simultaneously allows itself to be shaped by the place and objects it finds around it while it also shapes the place and objects and their meaning – a chair is declared a hill, the edge of the stage a waterside, and so on – to fit the performance.

Figure 44.2 Erwin Redl, *Whiteout*, 2017. Kinetic Light Installation, Madison Square Park, New York, NY. Photograph by Ira Lippke.

Site-specific art explorers the reciprocity between work and surroundings in a similar fashion. Traditional works of the visual and plastic arts are framed and put on a wall or displayed on a pedestal in a way that markedly separates them from their surroundings. Site-specific art instead relates to, works with, and therefore shapes and is shaped by the specific space it engages. Even for his smaller, almost two-dimensional pieces such as *Reflections V2*, Redl's use of frames is minimal, allowing for the lights to bleed onto the adjacent walls and floor and into the environment. Redl does not want to make the shape of a work a parameter of it, rather "the parameter is the wall as a whole" (Redl 2019c). As a consequence, his installations do not exist independently of their surroundings. Their embeddedness in a particular setting – atriums, ceilings, stairways, a public park, and so on – instead creates an interdependent relationship between the installation and its now installation-specific environment.

An installation can relate to its environment in different ways. While certain art, Redl suggests, enters a space like a piece of rock placed on a meadow, his installations aim to appear more like water that flows through nature. A river "participates much more with the environment" than a rock that is thrown into a meadow (2019c). The river metaphor is quite apt for our post-phenomenological reflections. It suggests the adaptability and fluidity of the artwork in relation to its environment, but also its agency, how it shapes the environment, both via the lines and curves it introduces into a plane, but also in how it defines banks, borders, bridges that simultaneously divide and connect its two sides (Simmel 1994).

The image of the embedded river that shapes and is shaped by its environment also offers a way to think of the unique temporality of installed improvisation. Descriptions of performed improvisations tend to draw on linear conceptions of time, highlighting the irreversibility of the performance, the inability to go back and correct decisions, and the need to look backward while moving forward (Gioia 1988). Or they note the ephemeral nature of improvisation where time is understood as a series of moments with each moment being but the gateway to the next moment, disappearing as it appears. But improvisations are also recorded, if not digitally or electronically then mentally and physiologically. They produce a physiological imprint for the artist and performer as much as for the audience. As such they acquire a certain permanence, they create "a moment" of duration, be it for a split second, the length of the performance, or beyond. Redl's

installation art records such moments materially. The moment gains duration and meaning in relation to the subtle differences that appear with each iteration of forms, angles, motions, and so on. Moving through or along Redl's architectural environments, time is bound, as each moment gains and retains its meaning in relation to the past it cites and for the future that it will disclose and by which it will be recalled, highlighted, and disclosed differently again in and as the difference against which the future current moment is profiled. Redl's architectural environments record time in this extended sense. The repeating patterns create flow without forward motion, directionality without finality. They are movement in and as stasis. They are in-stalled motion.

6 Installed Rhythms

Because installation art submits to the contingencies of a site, spontaneous decisions enter both the planning and the installation process. As in all improvisational endeavors, planning is not the enemy of spontaneity, but rather a condition for its possibility. It is only against the backdrop of plans and expectations that the unexpected can appear, that things can be assessed as being wrong and in need of corrective action. Spontaneity might be necessitated by material or technical challenges – Redl offered signage in a San Francisco subway station that interfered with the initial design plan as an example (2019c) – or be aesthetically motivated, as when an ad hoc decision is made to rotate an installation by fifteen degrees. In such cases, the planning must consider the contingencies of place and include decisions that do not follow an external rule or predetermined plan, but contribute to the development and execution of a program that is unique to the individual artwork and that evolves in relation to the specificity of the site while also having to be aesthetically sound (distinctive, interesting, and transformative).

As in performed improvisation, the contingencies of place are often a source for new ideas. This is neither to deny the aesthetic and technological consistencies in Redl's work nor their iterative nature. While there are breaks in his work – Redl mentions the encounter with Fred Sandback's work as a moment where he saw himself throw "everything over board, [where] everything changed in a split second" (2019c) – he also sees himself working almost like a mathematician who makes continued divisions that always leave "these little invisible left-overs," which are carried over and which he will try to make visible or explore in another piece (2019c). Redl suggests that in this way more than half of his work is self-referential, i.e., it relates to and comments on itself. In musical improvisation, the repetition of a note or phrase can be both the starting point of its alteration or a particular method employed to reveal, as we saw above, subtle differences contained in the repetition, differences that can form the basis for new explorations. We might see in Redl's reuse of "invisible left-overs" also a sample of improvisation's famous "yes, and…" principle, which is expressive of the affirmative attitude improvisation takes toward contingencies. The art lies in the ability to integrate such contingencies into an aesthetically interesting performance or work and the willingness to take the risk of failing to do so.

The iterative structure of Redl's installations underlies their musicality. Redl, who in addition to his MFA in Computer Art from New York's School of Visual Arts holds two BAs, one in Electronic Music and one in Composition from the Vienna Music Academy, likes to think of his light installations in musical terms. At the opening ceremony of *Shadows*, an array of animated LED lights along the walls of two staircases of an old university building, Redl saw in the brick wall the "rhythmic meter or the pulse of the room" and his installation "play[ing] the melody or the harmonic structure – the harmonic changes on top of that pulse" (Redl 2019b). The comparison offers a fitting example for how to think the interplay and interdependence of work and environment described above. Rhythm is a central element of his installations, a product of the repetitiveness of the dots, lines, and grids that make up his installations. "The grid itself is a rhythm" (2019c). When animated – and his installations are almost always animated, be it

through programed light patterns, by fans, wind, or gravity, and/or through the movements of the observer – flows and waves envelop his grids. Redl wants to make sure there is a "flow" to his installations, that they are "breathing"; yet, as we saw above, he also wants "things to start sliding away, moving about on their own, unexpectedly, imperfectly" (Redl 2017: 41). The flow needs to be interrupted with something rhythmic "or it becomes too New Age" (2019c).

Redl sees no connection between his work and jazz. He prefers to compare his art to the counterpoint structure of J.S. Bach's music. Baroque music is, of course, no stranger to improvisation, and the modes of improvisation it uses – proceeding iteratively, using variation techniques – also exist in jazz. Nevertheless, with regard to contemporary music, Redl finds his work to be more affine to the trance-inducing rhythms and "perpetual ecstasy" found in electronic music ranging from Donna Summer to György Ligety and Steve Reich. We should separate, though, the trance-like state Redl's installations can induce in the observer – a deliberate effect of his art – from the hypnotic and numbing effects of digital media. While the passive staring at projections on two-dimensional screens are hypnotic, Redl's installation with their translucent colors and rhythmic pulses induce what we might call an oneiric experience. Redl notes how his installations often trigger memories in visitors, who start talking about strange dreams they had, or how people like to do yoga in the spaces he creates. Visitors to his installations "see themselves as an avatar in that environment," which allows them to "step outside their daily environment," creating a special "interaction between [them] as individual and that strange dreamlike world" (2019c) they enter. The experience is Apollonian rather than Dionysian. It puts the observer outside of herself, in a reflective and associative state with heightened sensibilities, which is quite different from the experience created by large music festivals or events like "Burning Man," where audiences, along with many of their inhibitions, lose a sense of self and happily dissolve into an intoxicated dedifferentiated mass.

7 Social Spaces

Reflecting on the effects of Redl's installed rhythms on the observer, we moved from a hermeneutic perspective to an existential viewpoint, that is to a consideration of the role Redl's art plays "in the way human existence takes shape" (Verbeek 2005: 111). While not challenging the principle of individuation, the oneiric experience Redl's installations create temporarily distances the observer from their ordinary identity. As a consequence, his installations are able to remove social barriers and hierarchies among the people who gather in or around them. Entering his installations, Redl notes, people behave like avatars in a virtual world. They "breached the regular constraints of physics" and with it breach any social constraints,

> so even if this guy is a gas station attendant and is overwhelmed by this experience, and the guy next to him looks like the CEO of a Fortune 500 company, they start talking, because they share that intense experience, and they don't see themselves as gas station attendants or as CEOs, they are just virtual avatars floating in some strange space.
>
> *(2019c)*

We might note similarities with improv theater again where participants acquire new identities from simple interactions (Sawyer 2003). The difference with installation art is that on the stage of an improv theater, changes in identity for the most part are created through dialogue (yet one could certainly argue that the specificity of theater spaces also affects social self-identifications and hierarchies). What site-specific installations make palpable, though, is how physical spaces play a constitutive role in defining a person's self-identification, social standing, and how they help maintain social hierarchies.

Redl explores this social dimension of his art perhaps most directly in "Seeing Spartanburg in a New Light" (Redl 2020). The installation consists of nine different works with different

Figure 44.3 Erwin Redl, *Islands of Light*, 2016. Kinetic Light Installation, Duncan Park Lake, Spartanburg, SC. Part of the installation series "Seeing Spartanburg in a New Light".

emphases. For one of its works, Redl's artistic input was mainly conceptual, providing the idea of putting video projectors in each second story window of an abandoned building in an economically deprived neighborhood. The projectors display periodically updated interviews of people from this neighborhood. While aesthetically, this particular installation might seem to have "nothing to do with typical Erwin Redl" (Redl 2019c), its effects are much in line with those of his abstract light installations. Both are designed to make the visitors distance themselves from themselves, allowing them to reflect on their ordinary identity while removing social barriers and hierarchies among them. "Spartanburg in a New Light" shows that site-specific art does not only change a location's identity (Kwon 2002), but by redefining spaces – here by turning a place of poverty, abandon, and potential danger into art – the identities of those entering these spaces are also redefined, creating new venues of communication, identification, and empathy (Figure 44.3).

Let us again turn to the parallels between installation art and performed improvisation. Emanating from Guelph, the epicenter of critical improvisation studies, improvisation has been used in targeted ways in social outreach programs precisely for its ability to liberate individuals from some of the social constraints attached to the roles that their social circumstances put them in. Improvisational doings allow individuals to assume and experiment with different personas and activities and to reflect on their freedom to do so. In the process, improvisation offers opportunities to experiment and engage with alternative modes of communication and personal interaction.[15] Installed and performed improvisation are both able to increase sensibilities toward the materiality and singularity of the surroundings, circumstance, and the people we engage with, unlocking an aesthetic outlook on the things and doings that surround us, one that does not see everything in the techno-scientific (or pedagogical) frame as an object to be mastered or a resource to be optimized (Thompson 2011), but that reveals the materiality and singularity of our encounters and the ways in which our human existence takes shape via our connections to things, spaces, and different people.

8 Conclusion

Since the first cave paintings and ritual performances of prehistoric times, the visual arts have offered the opportunity not just to view and experience different things and view and experience them differently,

but also for the observer to view and experience *themselves* differently. Improvisational arts underline the contingency of such experiences, including of the social roles we play and hierarchies we maintain. Redl's light installations respond to the particular aesthetic and social experience of our age where the visual renderings of digital calculations on glass screens of various sizes occupy so much of our daily attention. Redl's light installations draw on, reflect, and counter this tendency in a peculiar way. They share with digital representations not just a certain look, but also the primary medium of the digital age – LED lights. And yet, the ephemeral nature of the medium light is used to create real spaces and movements in so-called "real time." Rendered on a screen, space and time appear as abstract, calculable forms that turn their observers into passive bystanders who find themselves positioned outside the projections that the screen renders. What they see, exists independent of the observer's physical location. The relation between eyes and screen replaces the relation between bodies and their environments. Movement, perspectival changes, changes in focus and duration all are defined by and confined to the screen. Outside the world of the screen, on the other hand, it is precisely the movement of our bodies that continually changes how we experience space, or more specifically, how we experience the body's relations to other bodies, objects, borders and their relations to each other. A similar difference persists with regard to time in and outside the digital. Facing a display, we surrender to the time and speed that is set before and for us, while in the material world it is the attentiveness and movement of the observer that participates actively in the experiencing of time as pulse, sequence, tension, pause, as empty or compressed, and so on.

A postphenomenological approach to art and improvisation does not have to reify the material, nor does it have to reduce experience to subjectivity and consciousness (intentionality); instead it attempts to catch glimpses of how reality and our sense of self emerge in relation to the things and technologies that surround and engage us. As Redl's art designs aesthetically intricate and alluring surroundings that straddle the line between material and immaterial, his installations invite their visitors to reflect on the constitutive role artifacts and media play in how our surroundings present themselves as well as how they shape our existence in space, in time, and socially. As they break with the minutiae of our everyday digital experience, they call forth the materiality of our surroundings, revealing the constructive reciprocity of the relationship between us and our surroundings as well as the provisional nature of this relationship, its contingency and singularity. In this sense, Redl's site-specific art allows us to experience how our sense of self is created not just as an improvised social performance (Butler 2004), but also as something that is mediated by our material surroundings, as installed improvisation.

Notes

1 See the "Introduction: On Critical Improvisation Studies" in *The Oxford Handbook of Critical Improvisation Studies* for a comprehensive summary of the evolution of critical improvisation studies, how it challenges the "master tropes" that are at the core of Western culture's history of "neglect, dismissal, parody, and general opposition to improvisation," and why "later scholars often (over)valorized the practice" (Lewis and Piekut 2016: 4).

2 See John Gilmore's insightful essay on Cézanne's and Kandinsky's different uses of improvisation as a creative tool. While Kandinsky is "treating painting improvisations as free variations on autonomous visual forms, […] Cézanne's has to do with interpretations of impressions" (Gilmour 2000: 191).

3 The first time I met Erwin Redl in his Ohio studio in April 2019, I asked if any aspects of his work – referring to the reflection series (Redl 2019a) he was working on at the time – was improvised, a question he answered quickly and resolutely with: "No." In a conversation we had the following November, it became apparent that the relationship of the artist with improvisation was more complex (Redl 2019c).

4 Verbeek extends Ihde's work who sees technologies in a mediating position, as defining "how humans experience an environment or world in a new or technological way" (Ihde 1993: 112). Verbeek distinguishes between a hermeneutic and an existential perspective. In the hermeneutic perspective,

> the key question is the role technology plays in the way in which the world presents itself to human beings; in the existential perspective technology is described principally in terms of the role it plays in the way human existence takes shape.
>
> (Verbeek 2005: 111)

5 Verbeek notes primarily Heidegger's failure to engage *specific* technologies, but also disagrees with Heidegger's narrative of loss, noting that today "we see that humanity […] is able to approach reality not exclusively as a storehouse of raw materials" (Verbeek 2005: 99).
6 Heidegger finds the essence of technology not in anything technological, but in how technology reveals the world to us: "What has the essence of technology to do with revealing? The answer: everything. For every bringing-forth is grounded in revealing. Bringing-forth, indeed, gathers within itself the four modes of occasioning – causality – and rules them throughout" (Heidegger 1977: 12).
7 Ingvild Torsen (2014) offers a detailed and convincing presentation of Heidegger's complicated stance toward abstract art.
8 Adorno analyzes inherent contradictions in Heidegger's (and his followers') "jargon of authenticity" and chastises for its elitism a language he views as a "trademark of societalized chosenness, noble and homey" (Adorno 1973: 5–6). In line with Adorno's critique, Jean-Luc Nancy more recently has shown how Heidegger's troubling political stance and his anti-Semitism (which surfaced more clearly only in recent years) is connected to an underlying contradiction of his ontology which "left a place – and not the least important – for a decisive element of the metaphysics of being: the presupposition of the initial, of the foundation and the origin, of the authentic and the proper" (Nancy 2017: 41). My reflections on installed improvisation do not aim to uncover what is authentic or proper, but rather the opposite: I want to explore the specific ways by which improvisation makes accessible the particularities and contingencies of artistic production.
9 For images and videos of Redl's work, see his carefully maintained website (Redl 2020).
10 Crowther notes how digital art can offer an "interactive dimension" that is the exception rather than the rule in traditional art (though it is quite common, we might add, in improvisational arts). Crowther, however, has digital art in mind that uses sensors or user-accessible software (see Crowther 2008: 165–6), not the kind of physical involvement created by Redl's architectural environments.
11 Bateson points out how a difference is a "very peculiar and obscure concept" (1972: 458) that is hard to localize. It is neither in the object (e.g., neither in the paper nor in the wood we might be comparing) nor in the space (or time) between them. "A difference, then, is an abstract matter" (1972: 458) and as such synonymous, Bateson argues, with how Kant defines an "idea." I would be remiss not to note that the following materialist contentions that are based on the recognition of differences and change, are not necessarily antithetical to idealist thought, but recognize the constructive role of ideas in the appearance of the material.
12 In a recent article, Dominic Smith draws on Deleuze's concept of singularity to critique postphenomenologists like Ihde and Verbeek who tend to bracket transcendental questions (and the dimension of language in relation to technology), and whose reliance on common sense "condition us to implicitly privilege the 'same' or 'general' in encounters with the 'different' or 'singular'" (2015: 548). Self-reflexive art, I would add, counters this tendency by drawing the attention precisely to what is particular, different, and singular.
13 One might also speak of a particular atmosphere or "Stimmung" (the German term merges the interior "mood" with the perception of an exterior ambiance) that Redl's architectural environments create. If I am not following the "atmospheric turn" (Griffero 2019) but draw on postphenomenology instead, it is because I want to highlight the active role of the material and of the observer in relation to each other (whereas atmospheres and moods tend to be recognized as preconscious and passive experiences).
14 I am drawing here on an improvised jam session that followed a weekend-long symposium on improvisation where many of the participants gathered at a friend's house. The co-organizer of the event, Rob Wallace, who has been known to explore all kinds of props for his drumming exploits, left his drum set and wandered around the room, an excursion that culminated in him playing a wood marlin that was hanging on the wall and whose fins presented an especially interesting object for acoustic and rhythmic exploration.
15 For an overview of recent activities in this area, including a discussion of improvisation's use for legal advocacy, see Ramshaw and Stapleton (2017).

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45
IMPROVISATION IN DESIGN PROCESSES

Annika Frye

New ideas in design do not only emerge from careful planning and thinking. They also arise when improvisation occurs: In the workshop, in the design studio, in the network-like processes of open design, but also in the enclosed laboratories of industrial design companies such as German electronics manufacturer Braun. Improvisation is part of the design process, but it is not necessarily visible in its outcomes, the products of design. When looking at moments of improvisation we can find new structures of design. Apart from fostering innovation, improvisation also functions as a participatory, democratic strategy that flattens existing hierarchies. Design processes become open, network-like structures rather than planning processes of a few genius expert designers. Following this observation, an understanding of the design process conducted *in situ* is important for a concept of design and an understanding of design as a practice.

1 The Process-like Qualities of Industrial Design

"Design Concerns Each and Every One of Us. It is Everything and No Thing" – this is the headline and claim of a poster created by Nina Paim and Corinne Gisel in 2016 for Depot Basel, a Swiss "Space for Contemporary Design" (Figure 45.1). It was distributed in the neighborhood of the Depot Basel Gallery and amongst its collaborating designers. Printed in black on neon yellow paper, the poster draws upon the ephemeral qualities of a newspaper article. The intention of the project was to start a discussion on the meaning of the term "design." The poster claims that when trying to understand what design is, we need to grasp its ubiquity.

Design is the practice of creating plans for daily artifacts, for systems and signs. Due to its simplicity and its inconspicuousness, many parts of design often remain invisible (Burckhardt 1995). The poster reminds us that these parts should not be overlooked. Design is also a constitutive part of transport networks and political systems, though these are not usually associated with the idea.[1]

As on the poster, every intentional action with a specific goal in mind relates to design. Opposed to that power and importance, design does usually not play a role in political decisions or even in many business contexts. It is, rather, considered a subdiscipline of the arts, mainly in the areas of furniture design, fashion design, or consumer goods. Such a common view of design (that is extremely narrow) hinders the creation of a differentiated picture of design as a complex process of making plans for novel daily artifacts and interactions. Instead it is reduced to designed products and their shapes. It is neither taking systems or signs into consideration nor the contexts in which designs are located. This is because design products appear simple and self-evident when

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. 2016
"Design Concerns Each and Every One of Us"
It is Every Thing and No Thing
BASEL, Switzerland — We're surrounded by design all the time. It's the beautiful vase you bought last week, the paper coffee cup you drink from every morning, or the turnstile you pass through several times a day. Design is pretty, ugly, but also inconspicuous things.
But design can also not be a "thing" at all. All that us humans do with a specific goal in mind is set up or done by design: our public transport network, our political system, our electoral
DEPOT BASEL

Figure 45.1 *Design Concerns Each and Every One of Us*. Poster by Nina Paim and Corinne Gisel for *Depot Basel*, 2016.

we encounter them. The context, meaning, and correlation of a designed object are defined beforehand in an invisible activity: the design process, which I consider the biggest part of design.

Designing is a complicated, lengthy, and exhausting practice. It includes research and visualization, it relies on the use of language and writing although it results in a simple and non-textual object. Designing is never the result of a single person's work, it is a non-linear, collaborative network-like structure (see Latour 2008: 6, 12). One reason for the prominence of a reductionist view on design is highlighted by the poster: Designing as a practice and its products – "the design" – constitute the same English term, as "design" can be both a verb and a noun. We thus need to differentiate between, firstly, design as a practice and, secondly, design as its outcome, and – thirdly – the discipline including the discourse around the question of what the term design means.

The distinction between products and processes of design is even more evident when looking at a particular phenomenon in the design process: improvisation. Opposed to planning and often associated with dysfunctionality, improvisation is typically not considered to be a part of design. Typical associations with the term improvisation would be unpredictability or unplannability, novelty, spontaneity, speed, freedom, openness, and volatility. All these factors also seem to guarantee the aesthetic autonomy of an artwork (Landgraf 2011). They characterize the most common modes in which we can experience improvisation – mostly in a performative situation – in the arts. But when taking a closer look at the process of design, we can observe that the products of design, although not aesthetically autonomous in the sense of an artwork, neither

emerge solely from careful planning and thinking, nor are they the result of autonomous artistic practice. They emerge from a process that is located somewhere between art and engineering (Munari 2008: 30).

Although contemporary design discourses, such as the Actor-Network Theory by Bruno Latour, which defines design as the practice of many actors in network-like structures, reject the idea of design as creating novel, revolutionary ideas, the concept of novelty remains a driving force in design. It is of importance here to say, that in my concept of design, every product (or system or sign) marks a difference from previous designs of the same kind. Novelty can be created by using a new material, technique, or by referring to a social or theoretical concept, as is often the case in gallery design pieces.

A particular concept of design that differs from cultural industry and from engineering would claim that design needs to exceed the functional (Adorno 1977: 378). Every design has an "aesthetic function," as Klaus Krippendorff at HfG Ulm once described: "In Ulm, the aesthetic function came to embrace such virtues as consistency, simplicity, symmetry, clarity, cleanliness, and honesty" (Krippendorff 2006: 298 ff.). The idea of aesthetic function roots back to Max Bill, Ulm's first president. The concept of functionality here marks the difference to an artwork, which – in a contemporary definition by Juliane Rebentisch – constantly produces novel experiences in an interplay with the viewer and the object. In contrast, an object of design will always be perceived as something potentially functional (Rebentisch 2013: 34). Following Rebentisch, even a chair on display in a gallery would continue to be recognizable as a chair even though it might be not useful and more an object of experimental design than a consumer product. Then, the status of a designed object has to be decided on from time to time. Some artworks use design objects (the most famous are probably the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp – e.g., the *Bottle Rack*, 1914) as well as artists who produce design objects (Olafur Eliasson's *Little Sun*, 2012). Since the production of design, thus, depends on functionality and not on a concept of artistic creation, how can novelty, respectively the "aesthetic function" be created during a process of design? As a trigger for the new, improvisation implies those methodological qualities in question. For instance, Italian designer Bruno Munari refers to the spontaneous creation of form in his book *Design as Art*:

> An engineer must never be caught writing poetry. The designer works differently. […] He, therefore, tries to give it a form as appropriate as possible to its function, a form that one might say arises spontaneously from the function, from the mechanical part (when there is one), from the most appropriate material, from the most up-to-date production techniques, from a calculation of costs, and from other psychological and aesthetic factors.
>
> *(Munari 2008: 30)*

Here, the main functional factors influencing the design are spontaneously combined to yield a new solution. In Munari's interpretation, which is distinct from that of the engineer, the designer is not using a specific methodology. The form, which would be the aesthetic function, is created based on a given context of materials and techniques available in the situation of designing.

2 Improvisation in the Situation of Designing

In the following, I would like to present the particular form of improvisation in the design discipline as a strategy. At times, what may emerge is a compromise solution, but nevertheless it is always a trigger for the new. I am using the phenomenon of improvisation to discuss changes in ideas of design activity from late modernism until today's open design processes and their network-like structures. Instead of looking at the singular product or only at the methodology of design, I try to make sense both of the outcomes and the processes of design.

The first time I realized improvisation was a remarkable and non-trivial design principle was at studio Richard Hutten in Rotterdam where I did an internship in 2009. During this time, the studio was busy preparing for the Milan Furniture Fair, the main design event in Europe where the community comes together each year to view new products and engage in experimental projects and discursive formats. My task was to design a bench made from stacked polystyrene balls arranged in a molecular structure to be exhibited by the Italian gallery *plusdesign*. Although the shape of the molecular sofa first seemed rather trivial to me, the connection of the balls was not a simple task. First of all, I tried to construct a kind of double plastic hook that would hold the styrofoam spheres in place, but they would always fall apart. I then tried to pour epoxy resin over the balls, but the resin ran and took a lot of time to dry. After weeks of experimentation, I was wondering what the plan was for this project. Richard Hutten, however, claimed that for this problem, as well as for all other design problems, there was no standard solution, no plan, and no "normal" approach to design. This would be the genuine challenge of being a designer.

I then decided to fundamentally change my approach to the project. Eventually, I ordered 385 mini-foam balls coated in white and without a label from a company that produces volleyballs for sports. I then connected them using superglue. Surprisingly, the superglue adhered very well to the rubbery surface of the balls (it melded the coated surfaces together), so I did not need any additional materials to connect them. Still, the foam balls had to be glued in place. Therefore, I made a wooden box with holes on each side. By putting each of the foam balls into the box and by marking them with a pen, I could glue them together, one-by-one, while always finding the correct position to create a molecular grid. In this way, I created the molecular structure that can be used as a bench.

Improvisation, in this case, dictated that I no longer pursue the approach with the Styrofoam balls and the epoxy. The turning point in the project came when we decided to use a different material from another context: the sports industry. The soft balls covered with a specific coating would improve the concept by creating a soft and rather comfortable seating experience different from the appearance of a fixed molecular structure we had in mind. Hutten had used coated foam in the 1990s when he was part of the Dutch collective Droog and when he made simple, but ironic pieces of furniture that look hard and square, but that were made from a soft material. The most evident moment of improvisation was when we decided to not sew or mechanically connect the foam balls but to simply glue them using superglue, which is usually a tool for the last-minute repairing of improper models. We turned superglue into a material of professional production for a gallery piece, as it proved to be simply the best way to connect the parts.

All this may at a first glance seem trivial, but figuring out these kinds of simple and direct ways to make things is a skill that needs to be considered as the core of the process of design. This skill, which we can call "improvisation," can be observed in every design process; it is used by the so-called auteur-designers like Hutten who make one-off pieces for galleries, but also in classical industrial design processes at larger companies such as Braun, as will be discussed below. Sometimes, as in the case of the air spheres bench, it can be even used for the production of the final design piece. One-off pieces, as described in my example, are mostly designed in a similar process. But the product of the process remains a singular product that still refers to the original improvisation which was used to make it. In a process of serial production, improvisation would rather become a continuity and disappear, as serial processes require reproduction. I have discussed that phenomenon in my dissertation on improvisation in design (Frye 2017).

Unpredictability is a quality we do not usually associate with design, as we conceive of design as planning. When looking for improvisation in design, we instinctively think of makeshift and emergency solutions that occur because of a lack of time, skill, or material. A jar that has been converted into a pen holder, for example, is such a daily improvisation. Although each jar looks different, the idea of putting the pen into the jar is trivial and repetitive. Design theorist

Uta Brandes calls these solutions "Non-Intentional Designs." They are essentially different from the methodological and historically informed practice of "professional" design (see Brandes 2008). In the context of user research, design researcher Jane Fulton Suri, in her study on "Thoughtless Acts," has identified these solutions as interesting in terms of user's needs and documented their poetic qualities. They point out how designs are used and how the appropriation of industrial functional artifacts really works (Fulton Suri 2005). Although these daily strategies are very similar to the improvisation in the design process that is of interest in this contribution, repetitive daily makeshift solutions mostly do not result in innovation. In terms of concept, they are repeating themselves. When using the term improvisation, I am, thus, thinking of a productive form of improvisation as an innovation principle, which produces differences with previous concepts in a spontaneous way and that is located in the particular *situation* of designing.

Improvisation is connected to a particular context, and because of the uniqueness of that context, improvisation is a non-repetitive, unplanned action. It is essentially unforeseeable but constrained by its conditions, as Edgar Landgraf explains:

> […] Improvisation is neither about the absence of rules and structures, nor about the advent of a true otherness, but rather can be understood as a *self-organizing process* that relies upon and *stages* the particular constraints that encourage the emergence of something new and inventive.

Landgraf refers to this quality as "calculated incalculability" (Landgraf 2011: 5).

Observations about the context in which design takes places were made by Donald A. Schön in his book *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action*.[2] Schön's book is based on protocol studies of talks between professionals in fields such as design, psychotherapy, management, and town planning. They "reflect" on their decisions and form new ideas while talking. One protocol stems from an architectural design class, where a student (Petra) and her professor (Quist) reflect on the design of a kindergarten located on a slope. The conversation itself is a typical project-talk trying to evaluate how the designed object could fit best into its context. By analyzing their discourse, Schön defines design as "a reflective conversation with the material of a situation" (Schön 1983: 78) and then he goes on to describe a process that resembles the process of improvisation at studio Richard Hutten:

> A designer makes things. Sometimes he makes the final product; more often, he makes a representation – a plan, program, or image – of an artifact to be constructed by others. He works in particular situations, uses particular materials, and employs a distinctive medium and language. Typically, his making process is complex. […] Because of this complexity, the designer's moves tend, happily or unhappily, to produce consequences other than those intended. When this happens, the designer may take account of the unintended changes he has made in the situation by forming new appreciations and understandings and by making new moves. He shapes the situation, in accordance with his initial appreciation of it, the situation "talks back," and he responds to the situation's back-talk.
>
> *(Schön 1983: 79)*

Schön's analysis is not only a realistic view on design in general, it also refers to two important qualities of improvisation in design in particular. The designer is reacting to the specific situation of the design process, which is defined by the task, the materials, media and language, and other actors. The goal of the design process is to produce a plan for a product, a system, or a sign that will be made by others in a workshop or a factory. Most importantly, the designer cannot know the plan when starting to design in advance, as the plan for an object is the very product of his or her design, and as every design project is, by definition, different.

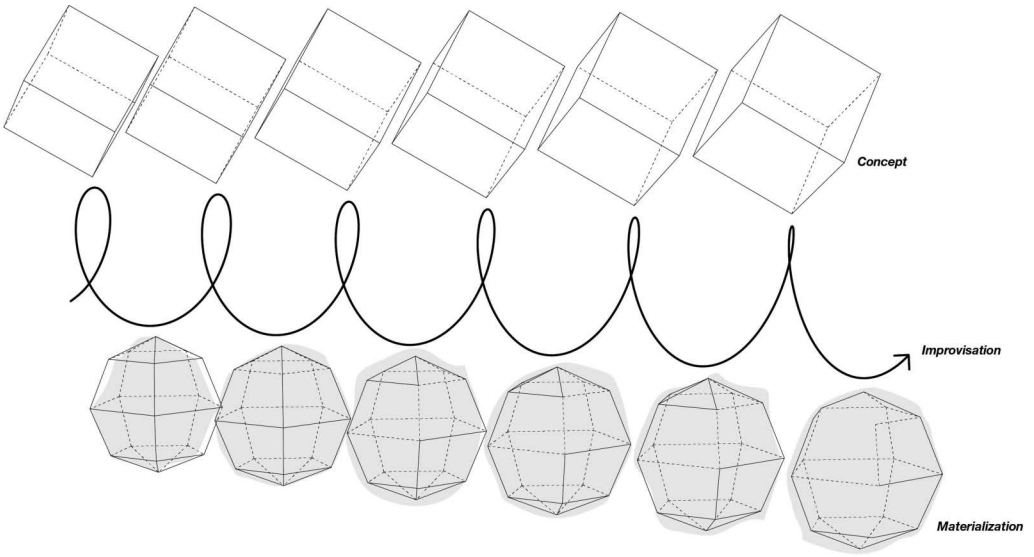

Figure 45.2 The design process where improvisation connects the concept and its materializations (own drawing).

The particular situation of designing is determined by *uncertainty rather than solely by planning.* Schön characterizes this uncertainty as "complexity" (Schön 1983: 79). Previously, in design theory, the idea of complexity has driven approaches to a rather planned calculable methodology of design. Examples of this include Christopher Alexander's "Pattern Language," which he elaborates on in his dissertation *Notes on the Synthesis of Form*, and which aims at dissolving complexity in design processes by careful analysis in an almost programmable, generative design approach that does not contain any improvisation or uncertainty (Alexander 1994: 1). Schön, by contrast, is focusing on the actual process and the consequences that arise from the particular situation of designing.

When looking at improvisation, the structure of the process of design and some of the main questions of the contemporary design discourse are at stake. Even though the products of design are planned entities, the process of creating that plan must not be planned in itself. Unintended changes are a necessity of design, and a quality. As of that uncertainty, improvisation marks the moment of transition from the known to the new: materials and techniques are combined into something new *through* improvisation. The designer's conversation with the material is not a circle, but it is advanced by improvisation. Expanding that concept, we can understand design-improvisation as a spiral structure that connects the concept and its materializations while pushing forward the design process (see Figure 45.2). I will discuss this process of material improvisation by using an example from the Braun design department in the next section.

3 Design Improvisation and Its Material Qualities

In the performative arts, the product of improvisation and its process of production coincide. Often, the improvisatory action is ephemeral: it disappears, whereas the outcome of a design-improvisation remains visible and tangible. The particular form of improvisation in design cannot be decoupled from its material qualities. Improvisation in design is essentially a "material improvisation." French anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has described such a material improvisation as a way of creating new objects from what is around using the term "bricolage." The bricoleur

uses improvisation to combine materials and techniques from his workshop. "[…] The 'bricoleur' is […] someone who works with his own hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 16 f.). Despite the "devious means" he uses, the bricoleur can make things that are as functional and as useful as products that stem from a "professional" engineering process – at least in terms of structure. However, the *way* the bricoleur designs is very different from the engineering process. His mode of creation is immediate and spontaneous, this leads to unexpected and surprising, sometimes poetic, results. Bricolage starts with the materials and the resources in the workshop and not with a defined task. The result of the work of the bricoleur is an interpretation of what an object could "signify" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 18), so how it can be used in case of the particular project: "His tools and materials are not predetermined by the project, but they are parts of a collection that can be re-assembled from time to time, without planning his project according to the availability of materials" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 17). Bricolage, thus, is a retrospective action reorganizing materials while remaining in a given setting, whereas engineering as a conceptional practice is going beyond the mere reorganization of given parts: "The engineer works by means of concepts and the bricoleur by means of signs" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 20). However, Lévi-Strauss views his analysis as a structural comparison. In practice, the engineer would always need to use bricolage, too (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 19).

As it seems, there are many parallels between bricolage and design. Bricolage is, in terms of validity and functionality, on the same level as expert work. It is also part of design processes: when tools need to be developed or when models as preliminary versions of a design product are made. But in design, bricolage has conceptional qualities, which is why the term "improvisation" seems more appropriate here. It not only refers to predetermined shapes and materials from a collection but also to new functionalities and new uses. In the design process of the air spheres bench, the "product" – the final bench – was not an object of mere bricolage that the "bricoleur" made for himself. It was an object to be displayed in a gallery and used by others. A designer, as Schön has written, is someone who makes a plan for a product to be made by others – but it also needs to be made according to the needs of many users. This is even more the case when we think about products of industrial design. It is, therefore, necessary to ask whether improvisation also occurs in the development departments of industry such as German electronics manufacturer Braun.

The products of Braun can be considered as a paradigmatic example of German industrial design in post-war modernism. Founded in 1955 and led by Dieter Rams until 1995, the Braun in-house design department served as a model for a productive collaboration of designers, craftsmen, technicians, and engineers. Its designs, ranging from electrical shavers to HiFi-systems, were the embodiment of the ideal "Good Design." As in a scientific laboratory, different actors from different disciplines engaged in the development of their electrical appliances. Essentially, their process was centered around model-making. Because the creation of the models required close collaboration between model-makers, designers, and engineers, everyone had to work collaboratively.

The first Braun electronic shaver prototype from 1943 (see Figure 45.3) was a combination of a hand-held flashlight and the technique of the American "Sunbeam" shaver. However, it is not mentioned as an "official Design" in publications about the Braun design department (see, for instance, Lovell 2013). The makeshift apparatus combined from given parts did not work very well, but company founder Max Braun continued the development of the product. In particular, toolmaking became an essential part of the design process, as the most important part of the implement had to be developed: the metal cutting foil that is stretched over the cutting knife of the shaver (Figure 45.4).

The holes in the thin metal had to be punched with a tool that only produced circular holes. For the functionality of the product, it was essential to have longer, oval-shaped holes (so that the hair would fit through the holes more easily while shaving). To achieve the oval holes, the technician Karl Pfeuffer had to experiment with the punching tool. He used it differently than

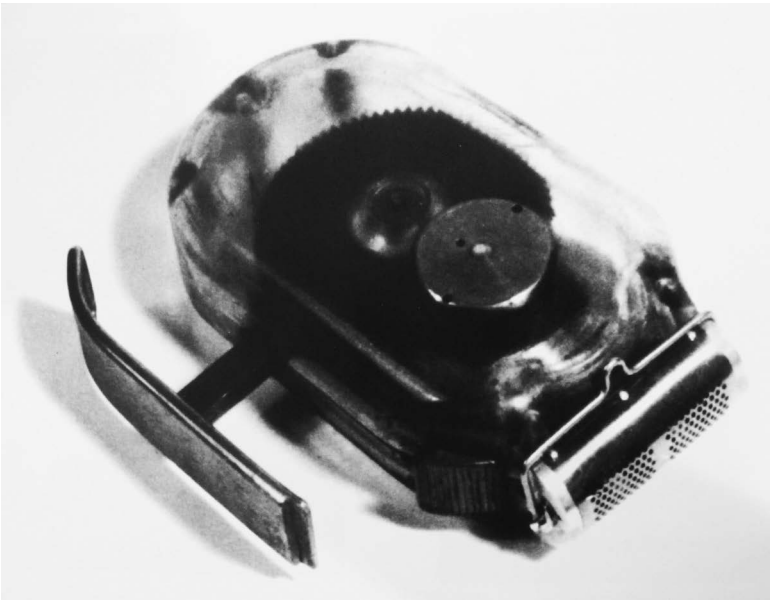

Figure 45.3 *First hand-operated Electronic Shaver by Braun*. A functional model with transparent acrylic glass housing, 1943.

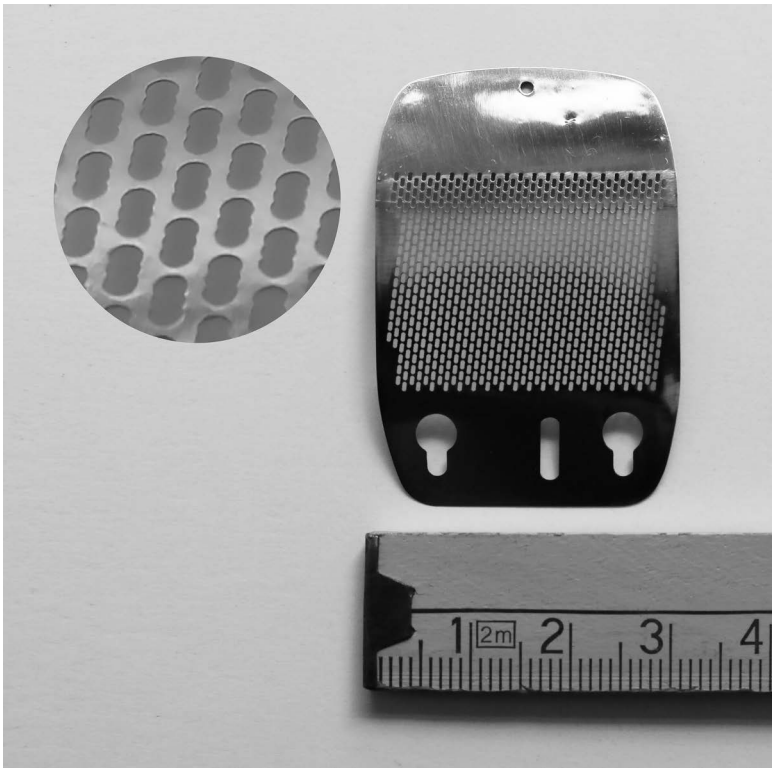

Figure 45.4 *Cutting Foil for the S 50*, first industrially produced electronic shaver by Braun. Developed by Max Braun, Artur Braun, Karl Pfeuffer, 1950.

it was intended to be used: while punching into the metal, he created oval holes by letting the holes overlap. He was warned that the tool might be damaged due to this deviant usage, but he persevered. This "workaround" was so essential to the process that the new design of the foils was patented and the drawing for the foil was printed on the packaging of the product (Klatt and Braun 2007: 22). All foils were now made that way. The example, thus, refers to a point I made in the beginning. The foil is industrially produced. Although the creation of it depends on improvisation, the later process of industrial production must turn such an initial improvisation into a planned action.

Improvisation here led to a new form (a new design) and also to a change in the design of the part, although it was the mechanic Karl Pfeuffer who designed it and not a designer. Further, the circumstances and materials contributed to the design. This shows that improvisation is not only a necessary part of industrial design. Also, when researching the process and its improvisations, our attention is drawn to the many actors who participate in design. When taking a closer look at this process, it turns out that the first steps in shaping the Braun products were made by the company founder Max Braun, as well as by the mechanics and toolmakers. None of them was educated as a designer, but their work, often described as "factory design" (*Werksdesign*), is a precondition of the success of Braun design. Their handmade, makeshift, and one-off production methods produced improvised models, test equipment, prototypes, and even tools. These were all initially makeshift solutions hidden in the research and development process. But they resulted in products that became famous as design pieces, such as the *Sixtant*. Even today, the shavers are constantly in a process of redevelopment. Over the years, a research network was established around them (Frye 2017).

However, instead of noticing the improvisation and the network-like activities in the Braun design department, the department instead became a paradigmatic example for a rigorous design methodology in Germany in post-war modernism (see, for instance, the notion of the Braun table fan *HL11* in Maldonado and Bonsiepe 1965: 16 f.). That design theory was established mainly at HfG Ulm. HfG was founded as a successor institution to Bauhaus after the Second World War in 1953 and closed after only fifteen years of existence in 1968. It was very influential for industrial companies such as Braun and, at the same time, contributed to a design methodology that defined design as planning.

In contrast to Bauhaus and Werkbund, at Ulm a rationalist-technocratic picture of the design process was created. HfG Ulm was part of the Design Methods Movement that aimed at rationalizing the design process. The goal was to distinguish design from art and craftsmanship. The best-known example of this is the cybernetics-inspired "Pattern Language" from Christopher Alexander, who aimed to rationalize design by dividing all "design problems" into systems and subsystems that would be tested according to "fit" or "misfit" to their context within a binary code (Alexander 1994). Design theorist Claudia Mareis who has researched the relations between design, science, and knowledge cultures in her dissertation outlines how, under the label of the Design Methods Movement in the 1960s, a euphoric desire for scientific rigor spread in the design scene (Mareis 2011). The contributors wanted to systematize design based on a positivist view of science. Diagrams visualizing the design process that stem from Ulm suggest that design processes are structured like computer programs. The functionalist paradigm of late modernism was applied to the process of design. In the following years, the design methods movement was heavily criticized for its lack of "real" practice. Instead, its main actors started to work on concepts of participation or process-in-situ observation. In a later version of his book, Christopher Alexander stated that his pattern language had been misunderstood and that he rejects the idea of a design method or studying design apart from doing design (see Alexander 1994). But the view of design as a planning process remains influential today. This helps explain why improvisation was not associated with design until the 1970s and why it did not play a role in discussions about design

methodology. In the following, I would like to present some positions from science studies that oppose the planning paradigm in design methodology, and that help to illuminate the emergence of improvisation in design processes.

Critique of modernist, positivist views on innovation tended to take place within science studies during the 1970s and 80s. The most well-known study in this area is Bruno Latour and Steve Woolgar's *Laboratory Life: The Construction of Scientific Facts* from 1979, which argues for a constructivist view of science. Apart from that, Karin Knorr-Cetina has described laboratories in the natural sciences as analogous to industrial facilities (Knorr-Cetina 1981). Subsequently, a whole new field of research called "The Practice Turn" (Schatzki et al. 2000) emerged, which led to a close analysis of particular research projects and their moments of innovation – which are often marked by strategies of improvisation. These descriptions from science studies are interesting insofar as they suggest a specific methodology: To understand *how* new ideas are formed, the context and the conditions that form their processes, and also their results need to be understood. To describe the basic conditions that inform the design process in which improvisation is located, historian of science Hans-Jörg Rheinberger introduced the term "Experimental System" (Rheinberger 1994). This describes a connection between materials and techniques, which, in close collaboration with the researcher, generate new knowledge. In Rheinberger's historical analysis, the experimental system gains the shape of a network of techniques, materials, researchers, and the objects of research.[3] The Braun design department has created such an experimental system around the development of the electronic shaver (Frye 2017).

Rheinberger argues that "the new" in the natural sciences is neither "discovered" in the sense of a revolutionary idea, nor periodically reconstructed towards new paradigms (Rheinberger 1994: 67). The new, in Rheinberger's description, is a difference that happens in the experimental system and that distinguishes it from other, previous systems. It arises because of the particular combination of materials and techniques and because the researcher carefully observes what happens in the system over a long period of time. The "difference" is created due to repetition. In an otherwise normative understanding of the emergence of the new, new ideas do not emerge from such a complex system of materials, techniques, and other actors (including the scientists) but in a pre-structured experiment. The experiment would rather lead to the falsification of a theory (or hypothesis) as it was claimed by Karl Popper (Popper 2002: 10). According to Rheinberger, the process of creating an experiment following theory is questionable because it cannot conceptualize unpredictability and new paths that may arise during experimentation (Rheinberger 1994: 69). Furthermore, experimental systems are lengthy processes that require years or decades of research activity. They create their own history and are embedded in individual social and technical contexts. In Rheinberger's view, the researcher, similar to a designer designing his or her design process, dedicates himself to designing the experimental system as such (Rheinberger 2006: 8 f.). Moreover, these systems only lead to new paths by repetition and the production of differences (Rheinberger 1994: 70 f.). Rheinberger here draws on Derrida's concept of *différance* (which is further explained in his book *Experimental Systems and Epistemic Things* from 2006 and already outlined in the English article from 1994 I quoted above). It can, as Rheinberger explains, occur "over many rounds of performance" that the research arrangement creates the unpredictable, which after some time even "must happen" (Rheinberger 1994: 71). The whole arrangement seems to provoke an "unprecedented event" (Rheinberger 1994: 68), which is analogous to the phenomenon I have called improvisation:

> So the recombination and reshuffling of and within experimental systems is a prerequisite for producing stories from other stories, something that does not and cannot happen if the 'lines' have become too 'pure.' The historical movement of the *différance* is always impure, it is a hybrid creation, it works by transplantation.
>
> *(Rheinberger 1994: 72)*

Improvisation then must be less be a product of coincidence than of intention. If we follow Rheinberger's analysis of the experimental system, improvisation cannot be planned directly, but the conditions under which it takes place can be designed.

When understanding improvisation as embedded in a network-like structure of a design process or an experimental system, more actors than just a single designer come into play. An elaborate concept of design must take into account that technicians and craftsmen may influence the form of the design object, too. Furthermore, design becomes an infinite process where products are in-between steps rather than the final step that is completing a design question. The task of the designer is to design *the process* that leads him/her to the creation of the design.

4 The Openness of Improvisation as Opposition to Consumerism and Industrial Design

It was only due to the combination of craftsmanship, technology, and industrial design that it was possible to achieve what became internationally famous as the "Braun Design." The reconstruction of particular improvisations in the design process and the observation of their conditions and presuppositions render the idea of a strict planning methodology and the paradigm of the singular author or design expert obsolete. The collaborative structure at Braun can be also be compared to today's Open Design processes. Its development process reveals the actual interdependence of various social and technical factors within a design. It is by no means a predictable process. As of these parallels, I would like to tackle the role of improvisation in contemporary design and the future of non-consumerist design.

A whole design methodology was derived from observations of improvisations by architectural theorist Charles Jencks and architect Nathan Silver in 1972. Their book *Adhocism: The Case for Improvisation* envisions a future world of artifacts, art, architecture, and politics that is created *in situ* from what is around and readily available. Jencks describes improvisation as a spontaneous, *ad hoc* action of assemblage and recombination:

> Adhocism [can] be applied to many human endeavors denoting a principle of action having speed or economy and purpose or utility. It involves using an available system or dealing with an existing situation in a new way to solve a problem quickly and efficiently. It is a method of creation relying particularly on resources that are already at hand. Incidentally, the word Adhocism has the property of itself being ad hoc.
>
> *(Jencks and Silver 1972: 9)*

It brings together the ideas I have mentioned so far: Improvisation as an act of innovation, as part of research, and as a participatory method. In their description, improvisation becomes a strategy to oppose mainstream industrial design. Rejecting industrial, modular design, they refer to the stories and the poetic qualities of artifacts made from previous objects and workshop leftovers. Things should be reused and recycled rather than consuming mass-produced goods.

The idea of adhocism was developed in the context of the ecological movement in California during the 1970s. Adhocism can be seen as a term for bricolage, maker culture, and early versions of open-source design. Users should engage in the process of design by making things themselves. They should use *ad-hoc* strategies to recombine given structures to achieve complex technical systems. Jencks and Silver's examples include Dadaism as well as Richard Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes. Open Design was also partly envisioned in the book on adhocism. Apart from the participatory and ecological implication, the idea of adhocism with its focus on the recombination of already existing shapes is a genuinely postmodernist approach. Jencks later applied the term of postmodernism from philosophy to architecture; his book *The Language of Postmodern Architecture* (1977) is considerably more famous than his notion of adhocism.

The concept of adhocism suddenly gained new attention when, in September 2012, the first Istanbul Design Biennial opened its doors. Under the label "Adhocracy," it brought together new methods of production following the principles of Open Design and improvisation. The exhibition was launched at a moment when all hopes and ideas of democratic design seemed to culminate in the idea of *design through improvisation*. Referring to utopian ideas from the 1970s environmental movement as emphasized in the *Whole Earth Catalogue*, the curators of the Adhocracy exhibition drew attention to the book by Jencks and Silver. All projects that were shown in the exhibition focused on the *process* of production rather than on the mere form of the product in relation to its function. The show featured, for instance, a 3D-printer made by Belgian design duo Claire Warnier and Dries Verbruggen. They developed a ceramic 3 D-printing process based on knowledge from the Reprap-platform, an Open Design project enabling users to build their own 3D-printers. By using the printer as a method of individualized shapes, Unfold also added typologies from generative design to the creation of ceramic artifacts. Other projects in the exhibitions ranged from Open Design of agricultural machines to household appliances (*Global Village Construction Set* by *Open Source Ecology*, since 2003 and Thomas Lommées project *Open Structures*, since 2009).

The curators of the exhibition saw the new processes of production as a challenge to established industrial design. Despite all claims of creating sustainable functional artifacts, design had failed to meet the goals of democratic, good design since the age of early modernism. It had also missed the chance to look at the individual user when designing mass-produced arbitrary objects. Hobbyists from the next generation using digital production processes would establish a decentralized, democratic, and local mode of making singular products. Now, according to the curators' hope, we could use the methods and techniques of post-industrial production to break up the one-sided relationship between users and producers:

> Making things, designing, is usually not defined as a political activity. Yet to make something – an immaterial interface or a very material city – is to interrogate oneself as to the definition of labor, the value of intellectual property, the ethics of consumption, the possibilities inherent in new productive processes.
>
> *(Grima 2012: 27 f.)*

Opening the idea of industrial mass production and breaking the rules of industrial design seemed to be challenging for both established companies that were no longer able to market their design products the way they did before as well as for the designers who had to divide their share in the design process. It is also a challenge for consumers, who are now considered to be participants themselves in designing. Breaking the rules of industrial design, however, enables participation and probably more equality. Since the adhocracy exhibition, 3D-printing and post-industrial production technologies have reached the market. They have recently been used to support healthcare workers with medical supplies such as masks, face shields, and oxygen masks during the Coronavirus pandemic to compensate for the lack of supply from the classic industrial production process. They were produced in improvised production setups, but some were tested and even approved by healthcare workers.[4] Thus, it seems that improvisation can be a successful strategy for breaking up centralized production and consumerism, even in the area of medical technology.

5 Conclusion

The structure of improvisation defied all properties of a typical methodological design process as it was conceptualized in the school of design in Ulm in the 1960s and by the Design Methods Movement. By that definition, design is a cognitive action. In contrast, design improvisation recurs on given structures, it uses what is around and it is combining materials and techniques

in unusual ways to achieve novelty. Like Lévi-Strauss' bricoleur, the designer-improviser makes rearrangements of given materials, leftovers from previous projects, and readymade objects when he or she improvises. Because of its openness and its non-hierarchical structure, improvisation enables participation.[5] It is also inclusive and inherently interdisciplinary. Furthermore, it enforces equality in the process of design, as it alters given plans according to a new need and as it is necessarily involved in every stage of design. The necessity of improvisation is also why many designs are created by non-designers: by craftsmen, technicians, industrial companies far away. But improvisation has not played a central role in discussions about design, in particular in design methodology, because design has mainly been defined by looking at its outcomes while ignoring the process. A view of design as a canon of innovative shapes or a strictly systematic view on the term design as a planned object will almost necessarily fail because it disregards the process-like qualities of design. Since design is always linked to technical and material conditions that may result in consequences other than those intended by the designer, every design process involves improvisation. Because improvisation proves to be productive, it has methodological implications.

In light of this observation, I argue that an understanding of the design process conducted in situ is important for a concept of design and a deeper understanding of design as a practice. This can be observed in many different contexts over the past decade, as well as in ongoing developments in design towards openness and sustainability. We can see this in exhibitions, in concurrent writings, as well as in the discourse about design running on social networks.

Notes

1 That very wide view of design relates to the English term that can also mean computer sciences or engineering. The German term "Gestaltung," in contrast, particularly addresses the creation of artifacts of daily use. See, for instance: Diefenthaler (2008: 177).

2 In the 1980s, a few other writers started to use in-situ protocol studies to analyze the process of design. Two similar studies were published by Bryan Lawson (Lawson 2004) and by Nigel Cross (Cross 1982). They were aiming at professionalization and a scientification of design to establish it as a discipline within general education. Different from previous attempts to approach design as a science, Schön, Lawson, and Cross were not aiming at defining how designing should be but were, instead, concluding their definition of design *from the actual practice of design* itself. Their protocols of designers' talks and their subsequent analysis later helped form the term "Design Thinking" (Seitz 2017: 10).

3 In this respect, Rheinberger's description is influenced by Bruno Latour's Actor-Network theory, which was also very influential for design. I chose to work with Rheinberger, though, because I needed a concept of improvisation and of design processes rather than a theory about the objects of design as actors.

4 Cf. https://3dprint.nih.gov/collections/covid-19-response (accessed October 25, 2020).

5 Richard Sennett refers to the emancipatory quality of improvisation when he describes how antique craftsmen had to improvise in architecture because the plans they conducted were insufficient and could not represent the actual built structure. Improvisation was needed to make a plan real. By improvising, they also could inscribe their creative ability into the design. However, improvisation and, thus, changing the plan was forbidden to antique craftsmen as they were slaves and were embedded in a strictly hierarchical structure (Sennett 2008: 134).

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46
URBAN IMPROVISATIONS

Paola Berenstein Jacques

1 Introduction: Improvisation and Urbanism

While in different fields of the arts[1] – music, dance, scenic arts, or even visual or plastic arts – the idea of improvisation has been in use as a means to challenge the ideas of composition, of single authorship, and of the artwork as a product – which leads to the creation of alternative composition practices, processes, and procedures – in the field of urbanism, improvisation is still regarded as the opposite: the absence, or even the misconception, of any kind of planning. Taking the contemporary revaluation of the idea of improvisation in the arts as an example, this chapter seeks to deepen the understanding of that idea, and of improvisation itself as a practice, in order to dispute the supposed binary opposition between improvisation and urban planning (and urban design), proposing improvisation be considered as a principle that's intrinsic to urban practices, processes, and procedures, especially ones that are more participatory, "informal," and associated with grassroots self-construction, in order to grant more complexity to urban theory and practices through the idea of urban improvisations.[2]

In order to explain urbanism's huge difficulty in embracing the idea of improvisation in its practices, it might be important to remind ourselves that, since the emergence of urbanism as a theoretical and practical subject field in the middle of the 19th century,[3] its study has been related to several processes of ordering and control – quite authoritarian ones, at times – with huge interventions in old cities. In its first century of existence, the field has dedicated itself predominantly to achieving the exact antithesis of "disorder" or "improvisation" in cities, i.e., ordering them through modernizing urban planning, regarded ever since as the antidote for "disorderly" or "improvised" spaces. Any kind of "improvisation" was considered a fatal flaw, a fundamental mistake that every modern urban project should avoid at any cost.

The new academic subject field created to solve the "problems"[4] of great cities (their different kinds of "improvisations," especially the social and urban ones) has, thus, already emerged with functions of clear control, norms, and order, following principles of functional logic and technical progress, which still rings true to this day in practical and, especially, in methodological terms. Despite the criticisms of modern urbanism's exacerbated functionalism and rationalism,[5] which became a trend in the 1960s,[6] the academic subject's main methodological bases are still operational, oftentimes in proposals that aim to deal with matters regarded as criticisms of functionalist modern urbanism, such as participatory urban designs, which always have to deal with the topic of improvisation in practice, i.e., with the different forms of improvisation that inevitably take place in any planning process with an actual participatory profile.

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2 Adhocism and *Bricolage* as Paradigms of Urban Improvisation

As is known, despite how old the artistic practice of improvisation is, its critical studies are somewhat recent, and in the past few decades, it is possible to notice this subject broadening its reach, covering everything from arts to global financial industries, including studies in neuroscience and computer science. Such a vast diversity of approaches in the critical studies of improvisation currently extends from narratives of political resistance and subversive practices, a "tradition" of vanguards in the field of the arts, up to its most recent neoliberal application for creating algorithms for online commerce networks or new forms of organization enterprises, from *startups* all the way up to so-called *smart cities*. However, in a history of researches on improvisation, numerous studies in the field of music stand out – especially the ones focusing on African American *jazz* music, emphasizing matters of tempo (and rhythm) related to the practice or *performance* of improvisation. There is, however, a scarcity of published works on the theory and practice of improvisation in fields typically concerned with matters of space, such as urbanism (or urban studies) and architecture (or design). As an example, we have an exception that confirms the rule: the book *Adhocism: The Case for improvisation,* published in 1972 by Charles Jencks and Nathan Silver.

Jencks gained worldwide recognition for his criticism of modern architecture and urbanism, and his stance calling for an architectural "post-modernism" in bestselling books such as *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (1977), *Post-Modern Classicism* (1980), and *What is Post-modernism?* (1986). That first book, dedicated to improvisation and published in association with Silver, sold far less than the others – although it might currently be considered a "classic" on the subject – and it was only reprinted in 2013, in a properly expanded and updated edition with a new foreword by Jencks, published a few years before his death. The book's central argument, the critical proposal of "adhocism," derives from the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*'s definition of the expression "*ad hoc*" – "for this or that particular purpose" – in order to contemplate new uses for different pre-existences, as Jencks and Silver wrote in their introduction to the 1972 version of the book:

> "Adhocism" is a term coined by Charles Jencks and first used by him in architectural criticism in 1968. It can also be applied to many human endeavors, denoting a principle of action having *speed* or economy and *purpose* or utility. Basically it involves using an available system or dealing with an existing situation in a new way to solve a problem quickly and efficiently. It is a method of creation relying particularity on resources which are already at hand.
>
> *(2013: 9)*

The book was part of a broader criticism of modern movements like purism and functionalism in architecture and urbanism; a criticism that, particularly from the 1960s, also began to revere vernacular or grassroots architecture, such as in the famous art exhibition organized by Bernard Rudovsky in New York City's MoMa in 1964: *Architecture without architects. A short introduction to non-pedigreed architecture.* Further examples in such a critical-propositional body of work worth mentioning are the urbanization experiences in Latin-American *favelas* (slums) in the 1960s, such as the ones proposed by John Turner and Eduardo Neira, in Lima, Peru; or by Carlos Nelson Ferreira dos Santos and the Quadra group in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Jencks and Silver's book presents itself as a manifesto for what would later be called self-construction, or even: *do it yourself.* The proposal had a basis in day-to-day creative practices such as adapting a used can into a candle holder, to then scale-up to the subject of planning design, architecture, and urbanism. At the end of the 2013 foreword, Jencks writes an *Adhocist Manifesto* in ten entries. The third one reads:

> 3. Thus adhocism is the style of eureca. It is the origin moment of new things, when forms are typically hybrid, and like all creative instants, the conjunction of previously separated

> systems. Hence, the style must remain heterogeneous to be understood. Like the best surrealism when seen for the first time, it is experienced as an incongruous marriage; often the copulation of incommensurable things. But as species and things evolve, their ad hoc attachments become supplementary, conventional and usually simulated. Fully evolved, this heterogeneity is integrated and non-ad-hoc.
>
> *(2013: XIX)*

This update of the first edition of the book doesn't just recognize its surrealist origins – it includes a contemporary critique as well. Jencks also explains how the 1972 book drew close to prevailing ideas, at the time, by other alleged "post-modern" architecture and urban design critics and theorists such as Robert Venturi and his "inclusivism" or Colin Rowe and his "contextualism," going as far as comparing his book to *Collage City*, a book published by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter in 1978. It is interesting to note that both books, *Collage City* and *Adhocism*, are admittedly biased in favor of a specific kind of improvisation that stems from the idea of *bricolage*, developed by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his 1962 book *The Savage Mind* (*La pensée sauvage*). Lévi-Strauss' idea is notably present right from the very first few paragraphs of Jencks and Silver's 1972 book's first chapter, *The spirit of Adhocism*:

> Perhaps the oldest and simplest method of creation consists of combining readily available subsystems *ad hoc*, since it is always easier to work with what is familiar and at hand than what is removed in space and time. At any rate, this is the characteristic mode of creation in tribal cultures: the creation of masks, clothing, weapons and shelter from materials available, such as bone, shell, wood, hair, etc. The anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has discussed this activity under its common French label, *bricolage*.
>
> *(Jencks and Silver 2013: 16)*

In *Collage City*,[7] Rowe and Koetter also used a collage of heterogenous fragments, deriving from Dadaist proposals, as a means to encourage a compelling critique – both of the functionalist excesses of modern urbanism, regarded as homogenizing and totalitarian, and of modern ideals of architectural purity, of urban design as a redeeming utopia, and, above all, of *tabula rasa*, regarded as an extremely reductive concept. The book – which was clearly opposed to any coercive, totalitarian, or authoritarian model of a more functionalist modern "tradition"– introduced the ideas of "city-collision" or "city-collage," an "enlightened pluralism"[8] or a city-palimpsest, and explicitly praised the fragmentary quality in the city, within a critical proposal for radical heterogeneity.

Rowe and Koetter (1978) had a decent reach at the time, not only in a university research and teaching context (the book's initial studies stemmed from some of Rowe's experiences with his students) but also in the realm of professional practice, especially in North America. The authors used the idea of *bricolage* as a way of thinking, in order to support their criticisms and also as a political form of collage.

> Collage and the architect's conscience collage as technique and collage as state of mind: Levi-Strauss tells us that "the intermittent fashion for 'collages,' originating when craftsmanship was dying, could not […] be anything but the transposition of 'bricolage' into the realms of contemplation" and, if the twentieth century architect has been the reverse of willing to think of himself as a 'bricoleur' it is in this context that one must also place his frigidity in relation to major twentieth century discovery. Collage has seemed to be lacking in sincerity, to represent a corruption of moral principles, an adulteration.
>
> *(Rowe and Koetter 1978: 139)*

The idea of *bricolage* emerges precisely as an example of this alternative way of thinking that Lévi-Strauss – after his Brazilian experience between 1935 and 1939, and especially his Amerindian experience with the native populations that lived in the territory of Mato Grosso, in Brazil – called "savage thought" (*pensée sauvage*).[9] As Lévi-Strauss so thoroughly explained in his works, this other way of thinking was not the actual thought of savages or the thought of a "primitive" or archaic humanity, but "*thought itself in a savage state*, distinct from a cultivated or domesticated thought."

Lévi-Strauss[10] didn't just demonstrate how societies regarded as "savage" might introduce us to other ways of thinking, alternative to scientific, technicist, and positivist thought, but he especially made it clear that "savage thought" was not the "thought of the savages," much less a form of thinking exclusive to peoples and societies regarded as "savage," but, rather, in a much broader way, each and every way of thinking that would not allow itself to be domesticated, be it contemporary or ancient, exercised from afar or from up close. "Savage though" does not precede, as evolutionists might assume, "domesticated" thought, that which is regarded as "literate," "civilized," or "scientific" – it permanently tracks alongside it, allowing for parallelisms and correlations with even the most complex Western ways of thinking, such as what's been done, in a way, by Bruno Latour or Paul Rabinow in their ethnographies of scientific labs.[11] Contrary to, for example, the Cartesian understanding of our way of thinking as an individual consciousness inside a timeline that emphasizes a time period, "savage thought" is a more anonymous, collective way of thinking, and can be spotted in the most diverse societies. "Savage thought" is adjacent to the sensitive world, to the arts in general, and, also, to grassroots, vernacular knowledge.

Savage thought, according to Lévi-Strauss, derives from unique ways of observing the world; it leans into concrete, albeit heterogenous, elements; and it stems from dynamic differences; therefore, it is essentially impure and complex, although it has always been regarded as confusing, irrational, or incoherent, for being directly related to proliferation or multiplicity of differences. The anthropologist's greatest feat was precisely to decipher this other internal coherence, or other logic, of savage thought, without deriving from traditional ethnocentric premises that tendency to see others through the lens of the self (i.e., the supposed "civilized" Western denizen). The savage, dissimilarly to the "primitive" – regarded as the simplification or the previous stage of the "civilized" – would be the "other" (or several others) to the civilized, to the Western denizen. Savage thought would be the very otherness of the Eurocentric, colonial, or colonized thought itself.

It was exactly in order to illustrate the "survival" (in the Warburgian sense) of savage thought among supposed "civilized" Westerners, highlighting the coexistence of these two distinct logics or sciences, that Lévi-Strauss resorted to his famous idea of *bricolage*, which, as evidenced by Jencks and Silver, is linked to the idea of *ad hoc*, but also to self-construction, and, therefore, can be regarded as a constructive principle for improvised urban planning, a way to think of urban design as a process that might embrace improvisation as its establishing principle. *Bricolage* would then be a savage urban thought.

> There still exists among ourselves an activity which on the technical plane gives us quite a good understanding of what a Science we prefer to call "prior rather than "primitive," could have been on the plane of speculation. This is what is commonly called "*bricolage*" in French. In its old sense the verb "*bricoler*" applied to ball games and billiards, to hunting, shooting and riding. It was however always used with reference to some extraneous movement: a ball rebounding, a dog straying or a horse swerving from its direct course to avoid an obstacle. And in our own time the "bricoleur" is still someone who works with his hands and uses devious means compared to those of a craftsman. […] The "bricoleur" is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project.

> His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are Always to make do with "whatever is at hand," that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or maintain it with remains of previous constructions or destructions. The set of the "bricoleur's" means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a project.
>
> *(Lévi-Strauss 1966: 17)*

There is a distinction between the *bricoleur* and the "artist" ("*l'homme de l'art*"), but also a particular one between the *bricoleur* and the engineer that can be used to distinguish a self-constructor from an architect and urban designer (planner), which demonstrates that self-construction is a building practice associated with chance, contingency, and, above all, unfinishedness. If savage thought is thought in a savage state, construction in a savage state would be self-construction, and urbanism in a savage state, through the exercise of *bricolage*, would be what we are defining as urban improvisation.

In contrast to an "engineer" or a more traditional architect, an urban designer, or urban planner, the *bricoleur* is not informed by a formal project, a future projection, but rather by his own instrumentality – by his present. He improvises with the materials he has available to him. There is a clear temporal difference when there is no design prior to action. Hence, the *bricoleur* never ceases to "innovate and enhance their supply," always "using the debris from previous constructions and destructions," the scraps and remains that came from other times and spaces, heterogenous fragments that are recycled, reutilized. Lévi-Strauss wrote: "[T]he rule of his game is to manage to use the *moyens du bord* [whatever is available on board, whatever is at hand]." Without a definitive design, construction never ends – it is constant and mutating, permanently moving. Design, thus, becomes an open process, a kind of "open work of art" or "work in progress," as proposed by Haroldo de Campos and Umberto Eco.[12] Therefore, *bricolage* would also be a continuous process of montage,[13] de-montage, and re-montage, stemming from heterogenous fragments, scraps, and remains, or – to paraphrase Walter Benjamin[14]– "the leftovers, the residues" that would be given new use.

> It too works by analogies and comparisons even thought its creations, like those of the "*bricoleur*," always really consist of a new arrangement of elements, the nature of which is unaffected by whether they figure in the instrumental set or in the final arrangement. […] This formula, which could serve as a definition of "*bricolage*," explains how an implicit inventory or conception of the total means available must be made in the case of mythical thought also, so that a result can be defined which will always be a compromise between the structure of the instrumental set and that of the project. Once it materializes, the project will therefore inevitably be at a remove from the initial aim (which was moreover a mere sketch), a phenomenon which the surrealists have felicitously called "objective hazard." Further, the "*bricoleur*" also, and indeed principally, derives his poetry from the fact that he does not confine himself to accomplishment and execution: he "speaks" not only with things, as we have already seen, but also through the medium of things: giving an account of his personality and life by the choices he makes between the limited possibilities. The "*bricoleur*" may not even complete his purpose but he always puts something of himself into it.
>
> *(Lévi-Strauss 1966: 21)*

The example of *bricolage* reveals a different relationship towards the temporality of savage thought, a kind of recycling that makes distinct time periods coexist materially by assigning new uses for the remains and vestiges of other times. Lévi-Strauss has also made clear in his articles and

interviews that he considered art and artists to be a kind of supply of savage thought within domesticated Western thought itself. Lévi-Strauss was not only an heir to a savage, indigenous "philosophy," but also to the procedures or "methods" (or "tricks," according to Walter Benjamin) of the surrealist artists.[15]

The intense surrealist tone in Lévi-Strauss' work, especially in methodological terms – and, in particular, stemming from *La pensée sauvage* but also later in different volumes of the *Mythologiques* – seems to still be a rather unexplored subject, even by anthropologists themselves. Despite the adjacency acknowledged by the author himself since his presentation of the concept of *bricolage* in *The Savage Mind,* not unlike what seems to have happened to Walter Benjamin, in whose work the surrealist impact was also poorly understood by philosophers, it is still rare to come across theoretical considerations on this proximity. Despite the fact that these surrealist contaminations had already shown up in Lévi-Strauss' biographies[16] and interviews,[17] we are able to find something quite close to the *bricolages* – improvisations, collages, or montages – from surrealist artists in the pages of *The Savage Mind*:

> There is certainly something paradoxical about the idea of a logic whose terms consist of odds and ends left over from psychological or historical processes and are, like these, devoid of necessity. Logic consists in the establishment of necessary connections and how, we may ask, could such relations be established between terms in no way designed to fulfil this function? […] This logic works rather like a kaleidoscope, an instrument which also contains bits and pieces and produces a process of breaking up and destroying, in itself a contingent matter […]. Finally, and most important, these patterns produced by the conjunction of contingent events (the turning of the instrument by the person looking through it) and a law (namely that governing the construction of the kaleidoscope, which corresponds to the invariant element of the constraints just mentioned) project models of intelligibility which are in a way provisional, since each pattern can be expressed in terms of strict relations between its parts and since the relations have no content apart from the pattern itself, to which no object in the observer's experience corresponds.
>
> *(Lévi-Strauss 1966: 36)*

Would this other way of thinking – which is intrinsically fragmented and impure, formed by scraps and remains, and which operates through a montage of differences – then be a kind of savage thought? It seems likely, especially as we draw closer to the broader field of anthropology (ethnography and ethnology included). As it is known, anthropology and urbanism are modern subject fields formed in the same time period (in the mid-late 19th century) with complementary purposes, at first: while urban designers fostered the modernization of cities, anthropologists cared about "other" cultures (be it in order to protect them or to colonize or domesticate them), which were being threatened with extinction because of this increasingly accelerated modernization (ever since the colonization of those called by the Europeans inhabitants of the "New World.")

3 Favelas as *Bricolage*: A Fruitful Thought-Image

In the book "*Estética da ginga*" (Jacques 2001a), I have already approximated self-construction – and, in particular, a more precarious form of construction in *favelas* (slums) in Rio de Janeiro – to this Lévi-Straussian idea of *bricolage*[18]:

> Buildings in a *favela* (slum) – and, therefore, the *favela* itself – never get fully built. The gathering of materials also never ceases. By the shack, or on its roof if there's no space, there is always a supply of pieces of wood, cardboard, plastics, bricks, and tiles, waiting to be used in a future

> upgrade. Construction is almost a day-to-day thing: it is continuous, with no completion in sight, for there will always be improvements or expansions to be done. This way of building, unlike conventional construction, is implicitly fragmentary because of this continuous state of unfinishedness. A conventional building, i.e., an architecture made by architects, has a prior design, and this design determines the final state, the moment to stop, a conclusion for the construction. When there is no design, construction has no final, pre-determined form – thus, it never ends. Therefore, from here on out, we're interested in discussing another type of construction practice: *bricolage*, which is associated with chance and unfinishedness.
>
> *(Jacques 2001a: 24)*

The first few, most precarious shacks in a *favela* (slum) are almost always self-constructed with fragments of varied materials remaining from other constructions, which can be recycled; and as the inhabitant-constructor finds (or can afford to buy) more appropriate materials, they replace the older ones. Initially, the materials that are "foraged" (recalling Walter Benjamin's metaphor of the forager and the ragpicker) by the inhabitants themselves will determine the construction of their first shelter, which depends on the circumstances of what can be found – what scraps and wastes are available, varied parts picked from different spots, heterogenous fragments from other constructions, invariably "second-hand" resources that will be reutilized and updated for new functions, which, many times, are different from the ones they were made for. These inhabitant-constructors are, undoubtedly, master *bricoleurs*.

> Chance is an integral part of the idea of *bricolage*; it is the incident, i.e., that little unforeseen event at the origin of a movement. To *bricolate*, thus, is to ricochet, to skew, to zigzag, to circumvent. The *bricoleur*, unlike the man of the arts (in this case, the architect & urban designer), never goes straight to the point or towards totality: he acts observing a fragmentary practice, circling around in a unplanned, empirical way. Construction with parts coming from all kinds of origins, or *bricolage*, would therefore be an architecture of chance, of the roll of the dice, an architecture without design. Instead of being determined by the design, the *bricoleur* is determined by his own instrumentality.
>
> *(Jacques 2001a: 25)*

Architectural and urban *bricolage* would, thus, draw close to the Dadaists' idea of collage and rolling the dice, the surrealists' montage and objective chance (*hasard objectif*), but, also, to the situationists' idea of deviance (*détournement*).[19] Despite the clear distinction between the *bricoleur* – who works with his own hands – and the traditional architect and urban designer or planner – who designs prior to construction – it seems that, as we establish the understanding of *bricolage* as a kind of urban improvisation,[20] we are able to take it a step further. Instead of having architecture and urban design being planned in a conventional way, we could seek to rethink the very principle of urban improvisation, stemming from *bricolage* as a way of thinking, not only as an alternative, collective, day-to-day constructive practice, but also as an alternative type of urban "design" which, by embracing improvisation as a principle, would achieve a complex and open-ended form of planning, a procedural form related to the unexpected, to chance, and to unfinishedness. A kind of *ad hoc jam* urbanism?

As Siegfried Kracauer very well put it in the 1920s: "The value of a city is measured by the amount of places it reserves for improvisation" (1995b). Kracauer considered improvisation to be a "reflection of the uncontrolled anarchy of our world" and, above all, he was always in search of its transformative tension and its emancipatory quality, stemming from the particular kind he used to call "distraction."[21] If the value of a city is measured by its improvised spaces, as Kracauer proposed, how can we challenge urbanism theory and practice from the perspective

of this idea of urban improvisation? And how could we challenge it from the specific perspective of grassroots improvisations – the ones that, unlike most artistic performances, consist of acting collectively, on a daily basis, and that is, in most cases, guided by common needs and contingencies?

As explained, since its inception as a subject field, urbanism has been related to several hygienists, ordering and controlling interventions, and to several plans for the zoning and separation of functions (and classes) in new modern cities, with one of its best examples being Lucio Costa's 1956 *Plano Piloto*, winner of the competition for the construction of Brazil's new federal capital city, Brasília, inaugurated in 1960. The subject field[22] has been dedicated predominantly[23] to achieving the antithesis of the aforementioned "disorder" in cities, i.e., the opposite of any kind of urban improvisation. However, even Brasília, an icon of modern urban purism, before it even was inaugurated had already featured several of these urban improvisations, especially in villages and *favelas* (slums)[24] constructed and inhabited by the "*candangos*" – the construction workers of the modern capital that was built in the middle of the country in a mere three years. In each and every design or plan, no matter how much planning and rationalization it features, there is always something that escapes the grasp of orderly control, always some kind of improvisation that emerges or survives (in the Warburgian sense).

Therefore, debating this through the perspective of an urban improvisation idea could be interesting, exactly in order to seek critical alternatives to the dichotomies of planning/improvisation and order/disorder, and to the understanding of planning (and design as a form of future projection) always being regarded as an instrument for the orderly control of each and every form of urban improvisation. Perhaps this debate could start by discarding this basic constructed opposition between planning and improvisation, seeking to embrace the very principle of improvisation, which is widely present in the day-to-day life of our great cities, especially the more peripheral ones, or in the peripheries of the more "central" ones, as an alternative critical possibility for planning. An alternative not unlike how the arts embraced improvisation as a different form of composition, which would incorporate *bricolage* into these other improvised ways of making cities in the repertoire of their own methodological tools, seeking to understand, in a more complex, but also more propositional way, these urban improvisations, especially the most popular ones, such as the case of the Brazilian *favelas*.

The first challenge there might be regarding the very principle of improvisation as a "philosophy of action," as Jean-François de Raymond (1980) did, or as a "science of action," as proposed by Olivier Soubeyran (2014) – an action in which, as in the case of *bricolage* and savage thought, there is no previously established norm (plan), meaning that the composition or planning (the organization or ordering) takes place at the time of the action itself, during the act, in the moment of practice, with the conditions and materials available at hand. This is a complex, inherently experimental form of action that is constantly moving and does not lean on a finalized design, and the design of which, thought of as a complex process, is built during the action itself – a type of montage that stems from the multiplicity of possible combinations of all the materials and other instruments available, which, as they are assembled, bring out links that could not be thought of previously. The biggest difference between the improviser ("*bricoleur*" or assembler) and the traditional planner seems to be related to the way they deal with the temporality of their respective creation (or composition) processes: while one searches for and favors the movement intrinsic to the process itself, the other aims to lock it down, suspending it from procedural action, in some configuration[25] that is more stable and allows it to be called a design (or a work of art). Therefore, by incorporating the principle of improvisation as a montage process guided by the circumstances of the action (experimentation) itself, in constant movement, we can achieve a sort of urban *bricolage* or *ad hoc* situation or possibility-oriented urbanism, which would no longer follow any doctrines, models, or generic, finished recipes, but would, instead, respond to the different situations

found *in loco*, the different contingencies, emergencies, and insurgencies of each specific montage, in a process of permanent experimentation.

Montage-based knowledge emerged as the modern vanguard's response to the excesses committed by modernism and its scientific rationalism – a response to the modern movement's plethora of functionalist methodological conclusions – but also to aesthetic-based formalisms, both of which were then still dominant in various fields. It consists of an open form of thought based in relationships, in unusual associations of ideas, in "elective affinities" (Goethe and Benjamin), by the "law of the good neighbor" (Warburg), which unsettles consolidated certainties. It is a form of procedural knowledge built during practice, through the proper action of assembling/disassembling/reassembling (montage/de-montage/re-montage), embracing chance (the surrealists' "objective chance"), as a sort of card game (or tarot, divination, or dice game, as in Mallarmé) with a permanent redistribution of the cards in play. The nexus emerges from the montage board – i.e., from the materials available to the *bricoleur* – which figures as a field of forces and conflicts that reveals unforeseen configurations and constellations. It is a kind of "thought in movement," which exposes the complexity and the "disorder" of things (the world, the cities, the times), which acts through its heterogeneities, its multiplicities – a thought in a permanent state of transformation, which rejects any final, conclusive synthesis, and which admits incompleteness as a principle.

The urban improvisations stemming from the *bricolage* are practiced in the form of montages, for they are continuously shifting in the endless montage/de-montage/re-montage process. When we put different fragments together, we're able to modify their positions, creating several configurations as we reconfigure (de-montage and re-montage) the order of selection, i.e., as we change the positions of fragments, creating alternative, provisional compositions or constellations (as Benjamin called it) – new nexuses and correlations. A montage board is not fixed, it is variable. We always start from an existing archive in order to collect, select, and pick fragments that can be laid out in various ways, different dispositions (or different positions), respecting its multiplicity and heterogeneity in a ceaseless work of decomposition and re-composition. Urban improvisations undoubtedly present us with what could be an alternative kind of planning, in permanent transformation as *bricolage*, an *ad hoc* urbanism: more complex, more open, and more processual.

(Translated by Joaquim Flores)

Notes

1 The ideas presented here stem from recently conducted reflections within the course "*Corpocidade* Laboratory," taught alongside Fabiana Dultra Britto in a recently-established doctorate degree program within the Post-Grad Program at the UFBA's (*Universidade Federal da Bahia* – Federal University of Bahia) Dance Institute, in which we proposed approaching the body/city relationship as a kind of complication resulting from improvisation processes. I thank Britto and all students of this course's first class (2019-II), who came from various backgrounds (visual arts, scenic arts, dance, architecture, urban planning, design, journalism, foreign relations, etc.), as well as various guest speakers – teachers from different subject fields as well (music, dance, urbanism, architecture, history, performance, etc.).

This course is also the result of our (the author's and Britto's) joint efforts over the last decade in coordinating the *Corpocidade* activities platform: http://www.corpocidade.dan.ufba.br (accessed June 19, 2020).

2 In Jacques (2011) I have already used the concept of "urban improvisations," stemming from the notions of Michel de Certeau's deviant tactics, from Giorgio Agamben's profanations, and from the situationists' (guided by Guy Debord) urban games, in order to discuss the improvised (or deviant) uses and different appropriations of public spaces by ordinary citizens. Such practices are definitely quite similar to what we might find in the everyday lives of the inhabitants of the "opaque zones" (Milton Santos) in the city, such as tactics used by informal constructors in *favelas* (slums), who create, modify, and transform on a daily basis, other uses and possibilities of appropriation by citizens themselves – I previously titled this "space in motion" (Jacques 2001a). Space in motion is not only associated with the physical space itself, but especially with the movement of the trajectory and the experience of moving through it, and it is

directly related to its agents, who are both the ones that traverse these opaque spaces in their everyday lives and also those who construct and transform them continuously. The spaces are constantly moving exactly because their users/inhabitants are the ones truly responsible for its collective construction. Such improvisation tactics are not restricted to opaque spaces more clearly established in the cities, such as *favelas* (slums); they also infiltrate more luminous spaces through a series of agents in the streets, including street vendors, homeless people, waste pickers, prostitutes, people with substance-use disorders, etc.

3 The term started being used from the big modernization and expansion projects of old European cities, such as the well-known Baron Haussmann's 1853 embellishment plan for Paris, and the publication of theoretical works such as the 1867 text *Teoría General de la Urbanización* by Ildefons Cerdà (Cerdà 1867), responsible for the famous 1859 plan *Reforma y Ensanche* (or *Eixample*) for Barcelona.

4 It's imperative for us to recall the state of misery in the working-class districts of the great European industrial cities, which suffered through frequent epidemic outbreaks and started being considered, at the beginning of the 19th century, responsible for the "physical and moral degradation of the urban worker," which, in the following decades, led to a "theory of the urban degeneration of the poor man." The "mob of nomads," as Haussmann termed the poor populations of working-class districts such as Faubourg Saint Antoine de Paris, started to scare the then-mayor, for that's also where the revolutionary and insurrectionary processes in the city would germinate – the famous popular uprising, the Paris barricades. As I try not to venture into these political/police matters already widely researched, it's nonetheless important to draw attention to, as Michel Foucault masterfully explained in his works, these matters of public health. Decisions considered sanitary and hygienist, apparently neutral, have always been directly related to a power dispute and, thus, to other intrinsic matters, especially political ones, ever present in the subject's history even though it is regarded as a universal, scientific, and purely technical field.

5 These critiques pertain to the most well-known aspect of modernism – a purist, positivist, functionalist, teleological aspect that emerged from a certain notion of technical, inescapable progress, exacerbating notions of ordering and control, which were decisive during the emergence of the scientific subject field – which we know not to be the only one. As masterfully described by Walter Benjamin: "The 'modern,' however, is as varied in its meaning as the different aspects of one and the same kaleidoscope" (Benjamin 1999: 545).

6 The critiques have intensified since the 1950s, from distinct groups such as Team X, the last generation of architects from the CIAM (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne/International Congresses of Modern Architecture*), or even the situationists, who, by dealing with everyday life in general and with the relationship between life and art, have reached the scale of architecture and, in particular, urbanism, and have introduced a radical critique of modern functionalism. Regarding the relationship between both groups – Team X and the situationists – and the circulation of situationist notions in the field of urbanism, see my presentation in Jacques (2003).

7 The book regarded Rome as an example of plurality and urban collage, as Leandro Cruz properly explains: "[...] the authors' interest in Rome's urban configuration, although already conspicuous in its first versions, gained depth after the Rowe and his team's participation in the 1977–78 contest and exhibition *Roma Interrotta*, consisting of the creation of new proposals for the city of Rome stemming from Giambattista Nolli's Plan (1748), known for its representation of solids and hollows in urban form – at times emphasizing, at others disregarding the thresholds between public and private spaces. Right at the book's 'Introduction,' some of its key ideas are enunciated. The authors started by putting together sort of an obituary of the modern city, and after that they criticized the separation between the redemptive promise of modern architecture and its limited reach." Entry in the website *Cronologia do Pensamento Urbanístico* – http://www.cronologiadourbanismo.ufba.br (accessed June 19, 2020).

8 "Utopia as metaphor and Collage City as prescription: these opposites, involving the guarantees of both law and freedom […]. The disintegration of modern architecture seems to call for such a strategy; an enlightened pluralism seems to invite; and, possibly, even common sense concurs" (Rowe and Koetter 1978: 181).

9 The reflections on savage thought exposed here derive directly from a previous, much broader work (Jacques 2020 and 2021), regarding another of urbanism's modern inheritance, titled "Montage of another inheritance: urbanism, memory, otherness." The work is divided in two parts – "Modern ghosts" and "Savage thoughts" – presented in February 2019 as a requirement for the promotion into Chair/Titular Professor at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA – *Universidade Federal da Bahia*).

10 The revolution in the field of anthropology proposed by Lévi-Strauss completely deconstructed old evolutionist theories, which still understood peoples regarded as "primitive" to be "pre-logic," incapable of achieving logical or abstract thought. These are peoples regarded as "remote" or "exotic," who would be, in evolutionist terms, still in the beginnings of a linear, progressive scale that would bring humanity from its "primitive" to its "civilized" form, from "pre-logic" to "scientific." Lévi-Strauss, thus, not only shifted the 19th-century concept of "primitive" (which still persisted in the 20th century) – with a huge derogatory burden – into that of the "savage," featuring a huge creative capacity, but also transformed

the very competence of thought itself, reclaiming it from the monopoly of the Western, and especially Eurocentric, philosophy.

11 Rabinow (1996) brings *bricolage* closer to the way of working in a "cutting-edge" science lab studied. Latour also researched, with the help of Woolgar, science labs (see Latour and Woolgar 1979).

12 Haroldo de Campos published, in 1955, an article entitled "The open work of art" and Umberto Eco, a critic of what he deemed a structuralist "orthodoxy" in Lévi-Strauss, published his classic "The open work" in 1962 (see Eco 1989), year of the publication of "The savage mind" by Lévi-Strauss (Lévi-Strauss 1966). De Campos, closer to Lévi-Strauss due to them both being close to the linguist Roman Jakobson, published several other articles that we can relate to the subject of *bricolage*, such as the 1969 book *A arte no horizonte do provável* ("The poetics of randomness," "The poetics of precarity," "The poetics of brevity," etc.): see Campos (1977).

13 I have worked with the notion of montage in Jacques (2008 and 2015).

14 "This work's method: literary montage. I have got nothing to say. Only to show. I won't steal valuable things, and I won't hijack witty formulations. However, the scraps, the residues: I don't want to catalogue them, I want to make them justice in the only way possible: using them" (Benjamin 1999: 502).

15 For more on this subject, refer to Walter Benjamin's most important article on the surrealists: Benjamin (1986). I have discussed the surrealists' wanderings through cities in Jacques (2012).

16 Such as the recent biographies offered in Wilcken (2010) and Loyer (2018).

17 See, for instance, Lévi-Strauss' interviews in Lévi-Strauss and Eribon (1991) and Lévi-Strauss (2011).

18 I have brought the Lévi-Straussian *bricolage* notion closer to the notion of self-construction in *favelas* (slums) on other occasions, such as Jacques (2001a, 2002 and 2007).

19 Regarding the relationship between situationists and the city, see Jacques (2003).

20 Among several other kinds such as, for instance, Charles Jencks' *adhocism*, the situationists' *driftings*, Michel de Certeau's deviant tactics, or even Giorgio Agamben's profanations. I have used these examples in Jacques (2011).

21 "Distraction – which is meaningful only as *improvisation*, as a reflection of the uncontrolled anarchy of our world – is festooned with drapery and forced back into a unity that no longer exists. Rather than acknowledging the actual state of disintegration that such shows ought to represent, the movie theaters glue the pieces back together after the fact and present them as organic creations" (Kracauer 1995a: 327–8, emphasis added).

22 As we've mentioned, for the new subject field named urbanism, which already came up as modern, any grassroots urban "improvisation" was initially seen as a hygiene or sanitary problem – before even being regarded as an aesthetic, social, or military problem – to be dealt with especially in the medical-hygienist or the sanitary engineering sense. The great modern city was then understood to be an enormous pathology, a diseased organism, and it's not rare to find the use of metaphors such as "cancer" or even "tumor" (used even during the 20th century by several modern urban designers, such as one of the most celebrated ones: Le Corbusier) to address some areas regarded as most "problematic." In Brazil, tenements and collective popular housing were deemed unhealthy in the central areas of cities and, after that, the same happened to the *favelas* (slums), which developed predominantly with the demolition of the tenements and started being regarded in hygienist discourses as a kind of urban "leprosy" that needed to be eradicated. In the subject field of urbanism, especially in its practical exercise of designing plans, still based on the planning monopoly, several methodologies were naturalized, and terms inherited from hygienist discourses with their medical metaphors are still used, such as the infamous "diagnostics" – as if the city were sick and needed a doctor to treat it – even by professionals who are most critical of recent hygienist processes of social cleansing that emerge from the new processes of spectacularization and gentrification of cities.

23 Be it in the so-called "corporate urbanism," currently hegemonic worldwide, geared towards market interests (neo-urbanism, strategic, tactical urbanism, etc.), be it in its mandatory critical and militant counterpoint, turned on the inhabitants' interests, which could be called "collaborative urbanism" (participatory, grassroots, community urbanism, etc.), this subject field's methodological issues, inherited from the 19th century, still seem to be under-discussed despite the numerous critiques of modern urbanism's functionalism and rationalism, such as the aforementioned ones.

24 Most of these villages, occupations, and *favelas* were taken down; one was sunk in the artificial lake (Vila Amaury), and one still persists to this day (Vila Planalto), and their populations were relocated to satellite towns such as one of the most famous, Ceilândia (from CEI, *Companhia Erradicadora de Invasões* – "Occupation Eradication Co."). For the construction of the capital city, there was a recruitment campaign for construction workers, leading thousands of people to migrate in search of jobs, income, and career opportunities in Brazil's central plateau. They were the *candangos*, who built the city with their own hands. However, in Lucio Costa's modern design for the city, there was no plan for popular housing for the construction workers that built it, and the planners expected these workers to move back to their states

of origin after the city's inauguration. I have written about this, particularly the case of Vila Amaury, in Jacques and Lopes (2018).

25 I throw back to the idea that the configurations are temporary syntheses of the relational processes established by the action of time, as voiced by Britto (2008).

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47

IMPROVISATION IN COOKING AND TASTING

Nicola Perullo

1 Introduction

In this chapter, I support the essential role of improvisation both in making and in perceiving. I will use food and gustatory taste as a particular case study, placing my argument in a broader framework, namely the *ecological* approach to knowledge and perception. With "ecological," I mean a paradigm that shifts from the subject/object model to a relational, where making and perceiving are the results of *encounters* between all the different beings that inhabit an environment throughout experience. This logic of encounter is not a face-to-face interaction between subject and object, rather, it is the capability of each perceiver to *correspond with* the environment. With "correspondence," I do not mean the "adaequatio rei et intellectus," or the correspondence of form with matter. On the contrary, following the notion proposed by Tim Ingold, I mean it as mutual exchange and interdependence.[1]

I will argue, on one side, that improvisation is constitutive part of the creative force through which food is made; on the other, I will argue that gustatory process always entails creativity, and that creativity entails improvisation. One preliminary clarification: supporting this position does not at all imply that I am claiming a "subjective position." The alternative to (supposed) control, predictability and objectivity is *not* subjectivity, since it is just the polar opposite of objectivity, in the subject/object framework. Rather, relational approach is alternative to this model, being based upon the very basic idea that living is both making and perceiving; therefore, as life itself cannot be predicted and controlled, it calls for improvisation.

I will proceed as follows: (1) I introduce some relevant issues relating to the notion of "creativity" in the culinary field. (2) I propose, stemming from Richard Sennett's notion of "expressive instruction," the idea that every food preparation and every recipe, from the most traditional to the most innovative, present a variable degree of improvisation; with "improvisation" I mean the unpredictability that is always at stake with respect to the "ductus" leading the creative process. (3) I present a short introduction to the notion of "taste perception" in the gastronomic field. (4) I propose, stemming from a notion of experience taken from phenomenology as well as from John Dewey, Tim Ingold and others, the idea that taste is a "task," in the sense of an ongoing process of adaptation and creation that emerges from the experience.

2 Rules and Creativity in the Kitchen

The field of culinary arts is very much committed to techniques, rules and instructions. Becoming a cook seems to deal with acquiring skillful abilities that have to do with transmitted knowledge; in order to gain such a knowledge, one needs to follow a long process of practices that leads to

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mastering food with precision and accuracy. This transmission can take place in the everyday and domestic space of food practices – learning from parents, relatives, friends, or also from the media – or in a professional apprenticeship. Regarding our main purpose here, we can overlook this difference for reasons that I will clarify in the following pages. If we look at the professional kitchen "system," we find a strict similarity with the military system, with a precise hierarchy, rigid roles and positions: the chef (a French word that shares the same etymology as *chief*, from the Latin "caput," the head) is the director, the guide and the master. In this framework, the mastery of the chef is transmitted to his subordinates – here I use "*his*" on purpose, as the professional chef has been historically gendered (cf., e.g., Cooper 1998; Korsmeyer 2004) – not in terms of creativity and genius (that is what cannot be transmitted by definition), but in terms of techniques, repetition and mechanical routine. The cooking process, thus, seems to have little to do with creativity and even less with improvisation. Western modernity, since the 18th century on, created a widespread framework according to which the space for creativity lies in the head of the cook, who becomes a chef when he is particularly talented. With the emerging figure of the chef as a *free* craftsman or even as an artist, the "expression" of creativity in the culinary arts has ended up coinciding with the invention of new dishes and recipes. Today it can be easily observed in the so called "haut cuisine" or fine dining scenario. However, what does *invent* mean in the field of cooking? If we look at the modern Western debate disputing about the differences between "minor" and "major" arts and between art and artisanship with respect to food, we find little to help answer our question (Perullo 2017).[2] Moreover, as it has been widely shown, the current artistic practices and various broader definitions of aesthetic experiences have made these oppositions somehow obsolete. On closer inspection, the definitions of the terms at stake are controversial and linked to two main theoretical points. Here they are:

The first concerns the meaning of creativity involved in this paradigm. For sure, one distinction has been conventionally drawn, at least for about two centuries, between the so-called "traditional" and "creative" cuisines and this is how the ordinary discourse about gastronomy still works today. However, this conception keeps the idea of creativity separate from the one of improvisation. Actually, they seem quite the opposite: the most common conception of "creative cuisine" mainly concerns the creativity of *ideas*. This means that a first, ideal sketch gives rise to a project from which any technical application follows: "The *technical-conceptual* search is the apex of the creative pyramid," says point 11 of the "Synthesis of ElBulli cuisine."[3] This search imposes a project *onto* the raw materials, the edible ingredients. In this framework, creativity *is* in the ideal process and its corresponding design: making new assemblages, inventing new techniques or grafting them from different fields, developing new technologies for cooking. These steps or possibilities stem from the "original" idea that has become a project. The project must be completely under control, connected as much as possible to the previous intentions and objectives. According to this picture, no variation is allowed, in principle. One of the most famous chefs in the world, Massimo Bottura, once said that there could not be improvisation in cooking techniques, while there can be improvisation in the ideas (Perullo 2011). Is this what actually happens in real kitchens? Aren't people rather working *with* the material, within a living environment and a concrete experience, facing continuous variations and attunements along the way? A strong conviction, however, looms large in culinary arts, especially among professionals, that goes *against* the very possibility of improvisation: once a new idea is born, it has to be fixed into a highly controlled protocol where every passage of the concrete activity that occurs in the kitchen is standardized. Note also another important point: within the framework above, creativity is a *descriptive-objective* term – it considers food an object, assembled in a certain way. There are two limits here, which I present as two further questions. The first one: is the "assemblage model" the right one to describe how food is made? In other words, wouldn't be better a different metaphor, such as that of "weaving"? The second one: thinking of food creation in terms of an object created by assembling

pieces leaves out not only the *experience* itself of making food, but also its destination, that is, the enjoyment and the appreciation on the part of the eater, and I will try to suggest that this should not be the case. I will support then an idea of creativity that is not normative nor objective, but *descriptive* in a *phenomenological,* that is, *relational* sense: creativity is not in a given set of rules pertaining to "styles" and types of recipes; rather, it emerges in the variations of the making.

The second point concerns the extension and limits of creative cooking in the conventional paradigm. According to it, the greater part of daily culinary processes, encompassing both professional and domestic ones, would be not creative at all, as they are neither research- nor invention-oriented. In fact, they are seen as mechanical, routine and sheer application of instructions and skills. It follows that creativity is understood in its narrowest sense, and it applies not only to a little portion of the sphere covered by the concept of "invention," but also to just a few cases and cooks in the world. In order to support a more radical approach, I will follow another path, beyond the debate about the supposed distinction between traditional, repetitive recipes and new, creative ones. The notion of *embodied knowledge*, strictly bounded with culinary skills, can be useful here: I will show how hands, physical gestures *and* ideas – whatever accompanying *or* leading their material realization – are not governed by prefixed rules but, instead, they develop along the experience itself. Food artifacts grow in this flux, where the makers have to cope with the challenge of working *with* live ingredients within a *live* environment (cf., e.g., Patel 2008). Improvisation, as its etymology shows, means unpredictability: every step forward *comes from* the previous one, but it does not necessarily follow that they were predetermined. It cannot be fully seen, or predicted, in advance. To suggest this, I will move further, claiming that the concrete, performed and lived process of making food overtakes and exceeds any transmitted technique, instruction or project. I will use the notion of *ductus* to this end.[4]

3 The Recipe as a Rich Field of Affordances

In a chapter of *The Craftsman* (2008), Richard Sennett supports the idea that "expressive instructions" are more effective and useful than "denotative instructions" using recipes as case study. "Instructions" is, however, a tricky word: as he actually suggests at the end of his book considering their expressive force, it would be more appropriate to call them "directions" rather than "instructions." According to Sennett, *expressive directions* provide a guidance for the "intelligent hand" about the sense of a practice as a whole, while denotative instructions intend to explain in an analytical, fragmented way, all the steps to follow. In expressive directions, imagination plays a fundamental role in opening up possibilities that are not predetermined; in the denotative instructions, instead, it is as if the process consists in the application of all the steps, assembled per juxtaposition. Why should expressive guidance be more effective and helpful? In one sentence: because it is flexible and open to the possible different choices that one has to take, as is the case in making food, where a certain amount of variables is at stake. Among them, it is paramount to consider that food is made of organic, differentiated and evolving substances. Moreover, like in all the other performative actions, the setting of the realization is always diverse. Lastly, the *ductus* – each different position of the gestures needed to work with edible materials – is specific to every single body, and also changes through and along the space inhabited by it. All these factors call for a high level of adaptation, flexibility and openness, and this is where improvisation emerges. Improvisation is not a spontaneous act, if we take "spontaneous" to mean a mindless occurrence. Rather, it requires spirit of observation, attention and immersion in the flow of the experience. It is like playing, or dancing, with the world (cf., e.g., Bertinetto 2012 and 2016b).[5] The notion of "experience" at play here is the "moving force" described by Dewey. Experience, as "a rhythm of intakings and outgivings" (Dewey 1987: 62), is always transformative: "Every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of

those which come after" (Dewey 1963: 35). Differently from the common picture, the ability of cooking is, thus, the ability to improvise in the above sense, the skill to *correspond with* the experience, adapting and confronting it in all its possible variations and interstices.[6]

In his book, Sennett presents the recipe of *Poulet à la d'Albufera*: boned, stuffed chicken, a classic of 19th century French haute cuisine. Sennett uses this example to highlight the difference between four ways of giving instructions: on one hand, there is the "dead" denotation, on the other, the three expressive ones: the sympathetic illustration, the scene narrative and the metaphorical (Sennett 2008: 179–93). As we have seen, dead denotation aims at telling "exactly" what to do, through listing in detail each step to follow. Here, the "verbs name acts rather than express the process of acting" (Sennett 2008: 183). In other words, denotative instructions, pretending to be simple and clear in assuming a direct correspondence between object and designation, are, on the contrary, quite obscure and ineffective, except for maybe people already experienced in the field – precisely those who do not actually need to follow a written recipe to make the dish. (Often, in the recipe books for professionals, no instructions are given, only ingredients and measurements.) The three other cases, instead, stress the expressive power of language through an analogical model in which "the imaginative trope becomes itself the explanation" (Sennett 2008: 184). Two important philosophical issues are at stake here: the *exemplary* and *creative* value of metaphor and the value of the so-called "tacit" knowledge. Sennett esteems both of them; with regard to the second one, we can observe that "implicit," metaphorical and lateral guidance, in an apparently paradoxical way, is not implicit at all, turning out to be very noisy and quite effective (cf. Polanyi 2002).

So, how do we turn a written recipe into a real dish? The iconic Italian chef Gualtiero Marchesi expressed this in a sentence from the field of music (Gustav Mahler said it, often cited then by Sergiu Celibidache): *the recipe contains everything but the essential*.[7] This is not just saying that the recipe does not contain all the rules one has to follow for the achievement. The *essential* is precisely the performance itself. Placing this sentence into our context: the cook (or the team, in case of professional kitchens where a collective realizes menus and dishes) faces all the situations and variables that arise in the midst of the process of making. Making an experience does not here mean "being expert" in something. The most expert cook does not have any definitive guarantee from his previous expertise that future outcomes will be good. Of course, memory of the past, historical and social heritage cooperate with what is the "present" situation; but the present situation, as it is a living process, is unpredictable by definition. Therefore, a cook does not act and move totally blind along the experience, but does so, rather, with a kind of "expressive" or "metaphorical" guidance, as we have seen before. It is in this frame that improvisation operates on different levels. In the conventional understanding, the idea functions as the (supposed) point of departure of the creative process – or, for those who do not invent, the written recipe one has to follow carefully. *Then*, there is how all this works along the paths of experience in which that ideal material is adapted and transformed into something edible. But what is the content of this "then"? It is not chronological; instead, it is logical. But in the above scheme – first the idea, then the material transformation – logic is turned upside down. In fact, both the ideal plan and the concrete realization have to do, from the beginning, more with a continuous *adaptation* with the materials, rather than with a sheer *transformation*. Here I suggest using the notion of *ductus*. The *ductus* is the style as idiomatic singularity, the knot where gestures, hands, bodies, ideas and environment intertwine, cooperating to make any kind of work.[8] Even the ideal plan arises and grows with a certain *ductus*. Every dish is a *ductus* in itself, as a weaving of many different adaptations and actions by the maker(s) along the experience. The *ductus* is not just the practical *expertise* of the artisan, gained through long experience and practice, often with the help of a master. *Ductus* is pervasive and prior even to this; it comes before any intentional "signature" of a dish; it is what cannot be taught and learned at school, what cannot be predetermined and predicted. Of course, the particular skills of a cook, their intentions and affections, their history and ideas, as well as

their attentiveness, responsiveness and care are part of this entire scenario. But these elements do not encase and deplete the ductus because the events that cooperate with it are always different. This is the reason why improvisation emerges: attentiveness, responsiveness and care are the generative movement that allows something to come into being.

The above argument is valid for so-called "creative" cuisine as well as for the "traditional" one, for fine dining as well as for home-cooking. Since each dish is different from the next, this is true for every single food item, even for the (apparently) "simplest" and the least inventive. To understand this well, one needs to shift from the object-oriented to the process-oriented paradigm of knowledge and aesthetics. The actual process of making a dish encompasses materials (as food is an organic and living substance, always in transformation) and human beings – whether they be those who raise them at a primary stage (farmers, fishermen, shepherds, beekeepers and gatherers); who manipulate them at a secondary stage (cooks, chefs) or who eat and consume them. Moreover, the scenario encompasses not only prepared food but all the materials: an entire non-human world – bacteria, parasites, light, temperature, humidity, etc. – that constantly and actively participates in the process, contributing to the never-ending transformation of raw and processed food and asking for a continuous engagement on the part of the maker(s). If one agrees with such an approach, improvisation easily overcomes the distinction between "rule-governed creativity" and "rule-changing creativity" as many authors have shown in the wake of Chomsky's famous distinction (Chomsky 1964; cf., e.g., Garroni 2010 and Bertinetto 2012). The first kind of creativity finds its expression within the constraints of a given set of rules, while the other works "outside the box" by overcoming existing constraints, with a posteriori recognition and appreciation of this path (otherwise it would be a simple and negligible violation).

In the first case, a given set of rules can lead to various outcomes, depending on the skill level of the maker. Let us take a basic food example, bread, which has been for many centuries integral to our daily meals. Because of recurring grain shortages in the past (but also nowadays), people have suffered from starvation, due to lacking flour and food alternatives. People have always looked for alternative ingredients to substitute the flour deriving from grains. Creativity flourished by virtue of necessity, thanks to which alternative ingredients have been discovered, new kinds of bread have been produced and many lives have been saved (Montanari 1996). On the other hand, one example of rule-changing creativity can be seen in the case of the famous British chef Heston Blumenthal. He hosted, for many years, a cooking show on television, where he broke with the commonly pursued didactic style, proposing a very complex and technical approach to food, with unintelligible but no less entertaining recipes (Hollows and Joes 2010).

Indeed, it is very difficult to draw a sharp distinction between "innovative" dishes and dishes that are just a repetition. First, what do "new" and "repetition" mean here?[9] As is well known, Japanese or Chinese traditions find this supposed distinction between art and cooking highly questionable, if not completely insignificant. Moreover, is it possible to take into account just the angle of making the food, without considering gustatory appreciation as well? Let us take a classic recipe – *spaghetti al pomodoro*. Whether "innovative" or "repetitive," it is not easy at all to classify it by just considering the ingredients or elements established by the recipe. It could be any nuance of a particular kind of tomato or of salt that makes a difference, or a peculiar *ductus*; but, as the saying goes, the proof of the pudding is in eating it. On the other hand, gustatory memory is not that precise and infallible. Could we state, then, that what remains is "just" the experience of tasting and a memory in the collective taste? In other words, if cooking is a language, it is always an interpretation (cf. Valgenti 2014). Like any language, it is open to creativity, as we have seen with the force of metaphoric expressions of recipes. In any case, beyond the debate about the "new" and the "old," what really counts here is that improvisation copes with different degrees and modes of capability in order to respond according to the *potentialities* that the maker encounters and interprets.[10] The recipe is like a map: it is not a representation of the field, but is, rather, an invitation, a *field of*

affordances.[11] The truth of a map is more an event than a datum; and truth "is not a correspondence of representation to fact: it is wordly. […] *And the critical answers to the truth of the map lie only in the map-in-use*" (Liberman 2012b: 49). Learning cooking techniques and acquiring skills from a master, after all, do not entail becoming a good cook. Between the acquisition of techniques and skills and the concrete immersion in the experience of cooking – not to mention cooking "well," that is, with a recognized degree of success – there seems to be a sort of gap. I suggest, however, that rather than a "gap," this is the very process of *correspondence*. I like to interpret, in this way, Wittgenstein's famous statement, "we make up the rules as we go along": the continuous, ongoing dynamic of the correspondences with all the unpredictable events that make an experience fills this apparent gap. This "gap" lies precisely in the actual life that every maker lives; therefore, it is the concrete *experience of cooking* she/he carries on that continuously fills such a gap.

There is one last point I want to make, and this will be also a bridge to the next section. The experience of cooking always asks for a continuous correspondence with the environment woven by the maker(s) – chef, cooks, the kitchen team, etc. – and by all the potential protagonists or background actors of the scene. In fact, with gustatory perception and its fulfilment as aesthetic enjoyment and appreciation, another issue arises with respect to improvisation as a general modality. Imagine the following scene: you are seating in a fine dining restaurant waiting for the tasting menu, created somewhere by the genius mind of a top chef and executed in the kitchen by his super professional team. Everything is supposed to be perfectly designed in order to avoid mistakes and accidents. From our above discussion, we have seen this is not the truth. In any case, suppose that such a process functions "like a machine," from the top of the head of the chef to the ground of the manual work of the cooks, in a standardized way, without differing from the previous day and from the day before that. The food arrives at your table. You are alone. As you take the first bite, something outside the plate captures your visual attention – you see someone entering the dining room, someone who should not have been there. This unpredictable event makes you nervous and worried, and affects your perception. You cannot focus your attention on the food anymore, you eat it, but in total distraction and, as a consequence, you cannot appreciate at all your wonderful tasting menu. This simple example shows the participatory essence of cooking performance, which also involves the eater in the process of enjoyment and appreciation. The engagement of the eater, however, further increases the unpredictability of the process, because the *taste* of a dish – and maybe here we can see a difference, for example, with the auditory perception of a music performance – cannot be recorded.

4 Gustatory Taste between Training and Expertise

As we have seen, improvisation does not usually come into play when debating the nature of cooking; there is not an explicit position in praise of "intuitive" or "improvised" cooking. Rather, improvisation has a negative halo: since I am not able to cook, I can just improvise. After all, we know that people – even many philosophers – like the ideas of control, mathematical order and predictability. Nevertheless, creativity has an important role to play in disputes about cuisine. If we look at the other side of food, the side of gustatory taste, the situation is different. It is very rare to find even an allusion to creativity, leave alone improvisation.[12] Differently from cooking, however, the case of gustatory appreciation is even more telling of such aversion: since I have no skills, I cannot appreciate it (a superior wine, a fine spirit, a gourmet dining), and the common reaction is not to improvise, but, rather, to give up. Of course, we all have to eat – and, therefore, also need to cook – while we do not *need* to appreciate food with a particular skill and vocabulary. Beyond that, however, the common paradigm depicts taste as acquired knowledge and ability, and the classic expression for it comes from the aesthetics of 18th century: *good taste*.[13] For my present purpose, I would just point out that "good taste" has to do also with the debate about the nature

of aesthetic sensibility and about the distinction between aesthetic and non-aesthetic properties.[14] This debate, as we will see, directly concerns our theme. Let us take an example from the wine vocabulary: the aesthetic properties are those that are not measurable – for instance, *elegant* or *rich* or *intense* – in other words, they do require concepts to perceive and do not directly depend on elements that can just be sensed. The non-aesthetic properties, however, do not, and they depend on something that can be sensed and that is measurable – for instance, *acidity* or *tannic level*. According to most scholars, aesthetic properties pertaining to gustatory perception take shape thanks to the acquisition of abilities that one has to learn from someone or something else (cf., e.g., Burnham and Skilleas 2012; Todd 2014). This often means following instructions, as in the already discussed case of recipes.

Who is a taste expert? We can distinguish at least two main kinds of expertise. There are food experts in a specific field – wine expert, cheese expert, coffee expert, whiskey expert, etc. – and gastronomic experts who do not consider particular foods but, rather, the whole *experience of the meal* itself. The latter usually includes the Western and modern figure of the "gastronomic critic," that is, the person who evaluates and sometimes reviews and rates restaurants for magazines, newspapers or guides. This difference is not without importance, as it entails also a possible distinction in the competencies that are required. Or at least, this is true in the usual depiction: the expert of a specific type of food is supposed to possess "technical" skills, whereas the dining expert – what John Dewey in *Art as Experience* (1934) calls the first possible example of an aesthetic experience – is supposed to have a general capability to evaluate the gastronomic performance as a whole. As we know, there are many different elements to appreciate in a restaurant: setting, service, kindness, the general atmosphere and other cultural issues associated with positive or negative values (tradition, authenticity, etc.). In the common picture, this ability to appreciate comes mostly from acquired experience; but also, at least for some scholars, from something that cannot be taught and learned – in the modern aesthetics, this is called the "je ne sais quoi" – but that has nothing to do, in principle, with improvisation.[15] There is a sort of ambiguity, if not a circularity, about this issue. In David Hume's classic statement, "good taste" comes from five features: delicacy of imagination (or delicacy of taste), practice, comparison, absence of prejudice and strong sense.[16] Apart from delicacy – which pertains to sensibility and which, arguably, may not be something that can be learned – the other four features grow and develop thanks to the formation of a culture. To put it shortly, at least a big part of what constitutes good taste it is a matter of cultivation. This is particularly true in the gastronomic field.

As we have seen, there is a strict analogy between the common picture of the "good taste" and the one of the "good cook." However, there are also differences: in the case of the gustatory expertise, the institutional space for formal instructions is smaller. Of course, there are "tasting academies," schools, courses and certificates for some specific fields (wine, cheese, coffee, spirits, etc.) but, although they have boomed in recent years, they do not have the same global impact as cooking schools do. As I already pointed out, since everybody eats, cooking is a universal and essential action, whereas skilled tasting is not. Gustatory abilities seem, then, to be just a choice of cultivation. This explains also why creativity as improvisation can be accepted if a need is calling – if I don't cook, I won't eat – where, instead, it is rejected in the domain of cultural appreciation. One of the main issues of the ecological approach to perception and to aesthetics concerns the notion of disinterestedness. As it is well known, disinterestedness is one of the keystones of modern Western aesthetics, in particular the Kantian position (although it is very complex, rich and, because of that, highly debated and far from being easily simplified). Disinterestedness usually goes in parallel with distance, which is considered the necessary ingredient for critical observation, judgment and pure aesthetic appreciation. However, I believe that critical observation, and contemplation, do not need distance. On the contrary, as I will show in the next section, they always entail participation and implication (cf., e.g., Berleant 1994). I have introduced the notion of disinterestedness

because I suppose it plays an important role in the conventional refusal of admitting the possibility of creativity and improvisation in gustatory perception. Instead of a perceptual engagement deeply involved in perceiving food and drink – an engagement that, instead, is unavoidable in making food – the common paradigm, molded on an oversimplification of the scientific method, and far from original Kantian aims – supports a position according to which tasting means detecting and recognizing in an "objective way" what is *in* food and drinks.

Many scholars and devices accustomed to modern, Western, scientific methodology have considered elitist the powers of the metaphorical creativity of language, and have called for a "democratization of taste." Let us consider two examples. One comes from the domain of wine: the "Wine Aroma Wheel," a "tool" invented by Prof. Ann C. Noble "to demystify wine talks," as the official website states. The wine talks opposed here are the metaphorical, poetical wine descriptions, full of aesthetic properties. By evidence, Prof. Noble belongs to the party that supports the referential, "denotative" nature of perception, against its "expressive" and creative nature. In the official website, the words used to introduce this "tool" are the following:

> Novice tasters often complain that they 'cannot smell anything' or can't think of a way to describe the aroma of wine. They don't have the words! Fortunately, it is very easy to train our noses and brains to associate descriptive terms with specific aroma notes in wine.[17]

Here we have a clear example of the democratization of taste aiming at a deprivation of aesthetic sensibility in favor of scientific methodology and authority. The idea is that learning to taste wine is just a matter of training the deputed senses (the smell and gustatory system, of course in connection to brain) just as one has to train muscles for some sports. Being an expert does not pertain to the realm of delicacy and sensibility; it is about knowing *more* about our senses and training them to work properly. It is not about using them at a different level, that is educating a sensibility that goes beyond the physiological apparatus. The second, noticeable example comes from the domain of gastronomic criticism – what we have identified as the appreciation of the experience of the meal itself – namely, the portal *Trip Advisor.* Situating itself on the opposite side of the classic, modern references of gustatory expertise like the *Michelin Guide* and grounded on the idea of competence and professionalism, *Trip Advisor* broke down the value of the authority of taste not through scientific methodology but thanks to the support of the market system in the globalized age. *Trip Advisor* gathers an enormous amount of taste preferences in a statistical way, creating rankings that have become very influential.[18] What is at stake here is not the inter-subjective, somehow interesting, dimension of such a practice, but the ranking system stemming from it. *Trip Advisor* is not just an arena for discussion, but also a system for creating evaluations that aim at appearing "objective."

Although they pursue different goals, the *Wine Aroma Wheel* and *Trip Advisor* share the same ground. They claim that taste perception and gustatory assessments have nothing to do with a superior ability – a "delicacy of taste" in Hume's words – even if the former operates on an individual level and the latter on a social one. Consequently, they refute the idea of any authority stemming from such skills but, at the same time, avoid completely the idea that taste perception is intimately creative and, so, tied to improvisation.

5 Taste as a Creative Task

In my view, taste perception is creative, that is, it is based upon improvisation, and gustatory abilities do not concern transmitted knowledge and application of prefixed instructions and rules, but, rather, they concern the capability of responding to the ongoing circumstances. Again, expertise *is* something. People develop different levels of sensibility and ability in detecting and

naming tastes and flavors, as well as different capabilities in appreciating meals and situations. These differences, however, do not rely on acquired and predetermined patterns. They depend, instead, on the practices and habits of responsiveness and care for the experience; they cope with a continuous attunement with the environment and, obviously, with the food perceived. It is a matter of paying attention along the path of the experience, rather than of an intention instructed by prefixed models. This brings us to a further clarification about how I suggest conceiving the relationship between "expertise" and "making an experience," because misunderstandings about the criticism of expertise often arise. Of course, my critique of expertise and acquired competence is not for praising scientific reductionism (as is the case with Ann Noble's position) nor ignorance and vulgarity (as is the case with *Trip Advisor*'s market statistics). A third option is possible: the idea that taste ability is not something we acquire through sensory training nor through following the prefixed codes of cultivation – what is usually called "good taste" – but rather something we constantly make, carrying our values and decisions along the experience. I suggest then conceiving *taste in use*, that is, taste as a task, made of a continuous process of attuning ourselves with the environment we actively contribute to shape, with the gustatory situation we are experiencing. Here, I employ "task" in the very general sense of any life project, as any practical or theoretical activity to be undertaken. Tasks concern perceptual engagement, which is composed of memory, expectations and, at the same time, of the very moment of the experience of tasting, an intake action, which presents variations, evolutions and changes. The notion of task is, thus, encompassing and inclusive but it does not promote an undifferentiated conception of gustatory activity; rather, it opens us up to a continuous production of different scenarios (Perullo 2018). Because of that, taste perception is intrinsically creative and molded by improvisation.

I need to point out one further aspect. Supporting the creative force of taste as a task emerging along the experience goes together with the framework of ecological perception, in which foods and drinks are not to be enjoyed and appreciated as objects but as part of the process constituting the environment. I agree with David Sackris when he notes that one does not need any *specialized* knowledge in order to taste and appreciate a particular wine; and I agree also with the fact that, occasionally, experts have prejudices that disable them from making an experience. Nevertheless, my agreement on these two points comes from very different reasons and it may overshadow a deeper disagreement. Sackris, in fact, upholds the position according to which in gustatory experience (differently from art) appreciation is not detached from liking (which I don't agree with) but, more importantly, he shares the framework of object-oriented aesthetics. Stemming from it, he thinks that there *are* objective tastes *in* the glass, tastes that everyone can perceive and appreciate, because wine offers just this kind of "minor" aesthetic appreciation (Sackris 2019). What I do believe, instead, is that everyone, including the experts, may benefit from a fresh perceptual encounter with food and wine in the same sense in which an artist has to "forget everything" in order to create, to strengthen the powers of exposure to the experience and cope with what happens in a more sensitive and attentive way. As Antoine Hennion and Genèvieve Teil aptly note, the *gusto* emerges from the continuity of the experience in a whole scenario as a moment of attention and reflection (Hennion and Teil 2004). Taste and tasting – in the proposed framework, we cannot distinguish between them anymore – occur as a task that emerges in the use, as a continuous improvisation that makes rules as we go along. The wine and its taster take shape one with the other, according to the logic of correspondence we described before. Wine here is not the object of attention, but it is an instrument of the orchestra. Gustatory perception is the orchestra. An ecological approach to taste – as it is not object-oriented but process-oriented and as it does not focus on the judgment of food objects but instead on experiencing and savoring the processes in which they live – permits us to see the creativity of perception and to increase it.

Let us look more closely at other practices of tasting. Like for cooking, there are two levels here: professionalism and amateurism, professional tasters and amateurs. An in-depth analysis of

professional coffee tasting, for example, shows that, although it may seem that the real experience is alienated in favor of the stabilization of fixed meanings, what really happens in the tasting practices is, rather, a continuous negotiation (Liberman 2012a). When the coffee taster scores a coffee, says the coffee leading expert Dr. Manuel Diaz, what occurs is a working backwards: one decides that a coffee's score is eighty-five, and then one will fill in the analytical categories of taste – the stabilized meanings expressed in words and tables – in order to achieve that score. The experts (sometimes without being aware of it) create a sort of "practical" objectivity "in the field," which, to use our jargon, is a temporary position, the function or the crystallization of the flux of forces constantly moving along the experience. Gustatory taste works like a "constant task of renewed adaptation to new situations," using the words of Hans Georg Gadamer (quoting Bergson) for "good sense" or "common sense" (Gadamer 1975: 24). Gadamer has chosen the word *task* because, far from being just compelled by constrictions and bonds, "task" has the creative capability to correspond with the rich landscape of affordances in an active way, without relying on any stable ground. I recall Dewey again: variation and identity are always coupled, codependent; if not, there would not be any experience (Dewey 1966: 11).

Taste is improvisation because it is a task like a fluid joint, a knot of different features interwoven. Because of its openness, "task" indicates a qualitative and narrative dimension, not an explicative one. It is an ongoing observation, studying and engagement: it is, like school, a constant process of education.

I want to conclude this paper with another case of the practice of improvisation through gustatory perception, one that involves me directly. It is my personal experience as a philosopher, educator and taste performer *through* wine. I have called this project *Epistenology* (Perullo 2020b). Around ten years ago, I started to become uncomfortable with the conventional grammar of taste appreciation and sensory analysis, for both the theoretical and educational reasons I have described so far. Therefore, thanks to my long experience and to talks with people in the field, who were as disappointed as I was about the narrow, self-referential domain of wine tasting, I began to explore different paths for describing wines and sharing their appreciation with others. The supposed "democratization of taste" molded by the scientific methodology proposed by sensorialists like Ann Noble or neuroenologists like Gordon Shepherd was not the best answer, in my view. I took another way round, in line with the framework of participatory knowledge and the ecological approach to perception. Year after year, with my students, I have been experimenting alternative ways of describing and communicating taste but, at a certain point, I realized that we were not only describing the taste of wines, we were *making* it – as a process of present relation *with* wines. A world of active engagement and attention unraveled in these tastings, approached as encounters. In this scenario, we become aware of the improvising nature of gustatory perception.

What happens in these "epistenological" workshops? Wine tasting circulates all along the sentient being and around it. Everything that flows in the midst of the gustatory perception is part of the game, both in enjoyment and in appreciation: there is not only the encounter of the wine with the mouth, and the cognitive and emotional relations that arise, grow and develop with it; there are also memories, stories and all the surroundings of the very experience. In these workshops, we have also touched, with our hands, the metaphorical powers of language. Even saying, "This wine merits 95 points" and "Notes of tobacco, citrus and wet stones" are metaphors, because a wine "on its own," as it were, is subject neither to grading nor to identification of heteroclite elements. The conventional paradigm states that "notes of pineapple, jasmine and white pepper" is a denotative description that grabs the sheer reality of flavor. Of course, in this model no creativity is supposed to operate. The same paradigm states, on the contrary, that a description like, "it reawakens the sense of pride in my need for love" or, "young, blonde, curly-haired woman running towards the waves of the sea in winter," are purely imaginative, personal, metaphorical, i.e., "subjective." If we look at the history of wine tasting, however, this is not true (Shapin 2012b); in

practice, we have realized that these are only three among the many ways to approach wine. The differences among them do not refer to anything other than different stories and approaches. For example, the commonality of shared descriptions when we characterize wine in terms of human metaphors — *as if it were* a human being – is, at the very least, equal to if not more potent than any phrasing in terms of the *dicta* of grammar and an aromatic wheel. Communicating about wine through metaphor, rather, accomplishes a much higher degree of agreement that is, at least, equal to if not greater than that of flowers, fruit and notes of pipe tobacco. This is because all metaphors are elaborated by the imaginations that arise from the lives of real people who have different experiences and ways of perceiving. Here we find a true "democratization of taste." Enthusiastic students discover a world of intimate and shared images, a background of personal and communal imaginings that can be communicated with the same level of reliability as conventional grammar. Language is not a cage into which we force the experience of drinking in accordance with established schemata; instead, it is the continuous unfolding of our relationships, the long carpet along which our feet tread on the journey that we are and become. We do not need to adapt the taste of wine to accepted grammar and oenology, as decreed by Émile Peynaud, the well-known French oenologist of the second half of the 20th century, looking for scientific legitimation. In the practice, moreover, we have realized that words sometimes describe taste experiences, but other times, gustatory expressions are just wordless. Attentiveness, care and appreciation do not need to emerge always through explicit and conceptualized language. They are often self-sufficient: they can indicate agreement, disagreement, communality, negotiations and variations.

When I suggest to my students that they should communicate the value of wine without using pre-established forms or lexicons, without learned grammars, without guides, the first reaction is often one of suspicion. When I propose that they liberate the imagination that is generated within the current flow, possibly by making gestures and creating postures, drawing images, coloring leaves or stones or walls, reciting verses, reading texts or singing, walking or dancing, they are usually immobilized by fear. But ultimately, the students, after their initial unease, enjoy this release. Freeing the imagination makes us feel good, on our own, with wine and with others. With wine, many journeys, many untrodden paths are opened up. It is very easy to fall back into the mantra of *I must*: "What *must* I feel? What *must* I think? What words *must* I use?" but, up in the hot-air balloon, drawings, free associations, memories of the past, songs, words and other means, for those who possess them, interweave and begin a different relation with the world (Perullo 2020b).

Notes

1 For a detailed presentation, see Perullo (2019). The perspective I present owes its debt particularly to John Dewey, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Arnold Berleant, Yuriko Saito and Tim Ingold. See also Perullo (2020a).

2 Here, I support the position that food can be art, stemming from the Deweyian conception of aesthetic experience and relational aesthetics. For other positions, see: Monroe (2009); Telfer (1996); Korsmeyer (1999). For a general discussion, see: Sweeney (2017); Kaplan (2019).

3 See https://elbullifoundation.com/en/synthesis-of-elbulli-cuisine/ (accessed October 26, 2020). *ElBulli* has been the most important and influential restaurant in the world for at least the last fifty years. For a discussion focusing on art and food with respect to Adrià's work, see Hamilton and Todolì (2009).

4 For a similar position in music see: Gioia (1988); Bertinetto (2016a, 2016b).

5 Alessandro Bertinetto is one of the main scholars in aesthetics who has shown the essential dimension of improvisation in creativity.

6 As already clarified, I take the notion of "correspondence" from Ingold's work (Ingold 2015). For the present discussion on food making, however, the most pertinent work is Ingold (2013). He sees making as the general process of formation of any life and knowledge. Making is the specific activity of every life, an ongoing and dynamic process of *agencing* (not *agency*) carrying on along the experience. As such, it is creative and based upon improvisation as ability to respond to the experience.

7 See the Mahler's sentence – "Was steht in der Partitur? Alles, nur das Wesentliche nicht!" – in the Celibidache's glossar (http://www.celibidache.info/glossar.html#partitur. (accessed October 26, 2020)). Peter Kivy as well, in *Introduction to Philosophy of Music* (1998), uses the metaphor of recipe to illustrate the role of the score with respect to the music (thanks to Marcello Ruta for this suggestion). I have doubts on the value of this analogy, mainly because of the issue of recording: whatever we mean by "record" and the different facets we associate with it, the experience of music can be recorded, while the experience of eating cannot. There seems to be some difference between hearing and tasting.

8 I take the notion of "ductus" from Jacques Derrida, who used the term in relation to painting: "It signifies the idiomatic trait of the draftsman coming along to sign all by itself, before even the undersigning of the proper name" (Derrida 1978: 193).

9 In Perullo (2017), I claim that "cuisine can be art if it is meant in terms of fascination of the new and a reminder of the well-known" (Perullo 2017: 28). I show there that the dichotomy of new/old has to be assumed as a polar correspondence, because of the impossibility of any sheer distinction of the two notions – in a historical, anthropological and aesthetic sense. I believe that only the relational paradigm, in which one does not focus on the food as an object but on her/his encounter with it as an experience of intertwining, can give a reasonable account of what "new" and "old" may mean in their context.

10 For the notion of "potentialities" in this sense (as a combination and elaboration from the idea of perception proposed by authors like Gibson, Deleuze and Whitehead) see Massumi (2008).

11 J. J. Gibson developed the notion of affordances. Affordance has been a useful segue to an ecological and interactionist view: between organisms and the environment, a world of possibilities unfolds; a world where information and invitations continuously build on one another. Affordance is paramount for understanding the relational perspective that food and taste bring to philosophy, namely to a relational aesthetics where perception is not "of" but "with" something. See Gibson (1966: 136–8).

12 There are, of course, supporters of the creativity of the perception; we have already mentioned a few in this paper: Dewey, Gibson, Merleau-Ponty, Ingold, although they dwell outside of the field of food studies. Here there are some exceptions, especially in the sociological field, namely Liberman (2012) and Hennion and Teil (2004). I developed a theory about the creativity of taste perception in Perullo (2018) and in Perullo (2020b). There are few mentions of creativity also in Kaplan (2019).

13 For a general introduction and discussion of Enlightenment conceptions of taste to gustatory perception, see Korsmeyer (1999: 103–45). See also Kaplan (2019: 64–72); Russo (2002). For a classic reference in sociology, see Bourdieu (1984); Shapin (2012a).

14 Frank Sibley devoted a whole paper on this topic, claiming that critics are those who are good at recognizing aesthetic qualities and distinguishing them from the non-aesthetic. See Sibley (2001a, 2001b), in which he discusses also the metaphorical power of language at stake in food descriptions. According to the view I suggest here, however, it is not a matter of *recognizing* qualities, rather of *encountering* and *making* them.

15 The notion of "je ne sais quoi" (*a certain something*) is central in the 18th century debate on taste. Montesquieu, for example, in his essay "Du je ne sais quoi" names it as something beside the beautiful and the good. For an historical overview on the "je ne sais quoi" see D'Angelo and Velotti (1997); Scholar (2005).

16 See the following famous passage:

> Strong sense, united to delicate sentiment, improved by practice, perfected by comparison, and cleared of all prejudice, can alone entitle critics to this valuable character; and the joint verdict of such, wherever they are to be found, is the true standard of taste and beauty.
>
> (Hume 2004: 17)

David Hume's claims stimulated a huge debate among philosophers. Just to mention two of them in the analytic tradition, Carroll (1984) and Levinson (2002).

17 https://www.winearomawheel.com/ (accessed February 5, 2020).

18 These questions cross the actual debate about the crisis or even "the death" of expertise in the age of "pop culture." See Iggers (2007); Shapin (2012a); Nichols (2017).

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48

CREATIVITY AND IMPROVISATION IN GAMES

C. Thi Nguyen

Here are two very different conceptions of what's going on with games. According to some, games aren't particularly special. They apply some fancy new technologies, but they're still basically versions of traditional art-forms, with a couple of added wrinkles – like interactivity. Games are, perhaps, a slightly new way of telling a story, expressing some meaning, or creating a beautiful environment. In that case, we should expect the relationship between game designer and player to map onto the familiar relationship between artist and audience. Under this traditional paradigm, the game designer is the primary creative contributor. The designer creates the game – creates the environment and graphics and a story. The player then explores the game to see those graphics and discover that story. Surely, the game player is not entirely passive – but then, neither is the novel-reader or music-listener. But the game player does not make a substantial creative contribution to the artwork. They are simply exploring that which another created for them. The player's activity helps them bring the artist's work into view, and appreciate that distinct object – but player activity is not an artistic endeavor.

But, according to others, games are a radically new form of art, one that makes substantially more room for the participation of the player. Game-players aren't just exploring a pre-created world or uncovering a pre-set story. They are adding to the artistic content; they are making a creative contribution to the art. Under this second conception, the game-player turns out to be a kind of artist – or, at the very least, a significant aesthetic contribution.

Much depends now on what we take to be the primary *artistic object* in the ecosystem of game and game-playing. Under the designer-centric conception, the artistic object is the stable artifact – the game itself. Different players may explore the artistic object in different ways, but that difference is relatively unimportant. It is rather like how different readers will read with varying speed, intensity, and imagination. All the various readers of Tove Jansson's strange and delectable novel, *True Deceiver*, are reading in their own way. But, in the end, they are reading the very same text. When they argue about the proper interpretations, there is a stable object in common, which they can all refer to. Similarly, all the players of Infocom's text-adventure classic *Suspended* are exploring the same network of possible locations and game-responses. Their pathways may be different, those varying pathways are all directed towards exploring the very same network. Notice the strategy of this kind of account. In order to locate artistic responsibility primarily in the designer, we need to claim that different playings don't amount to much extra artistic significance. The artistic significance is to be found in the repeatable, stable object – the game itself. The player is merely an audience member, and their playings merely their way of exploring that stable object. Only the designer makes a real artistic contribution.

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Alternately, we could hold that each particular playing of a game is a distinct *performance* – and that each performance can have its own distinctive artistic merit. Under this conception, the player is also a kind of artist, who creatively contributes in an artistic manner. What, then, is the relationship between game designer and game player? One parallel springs immediately to mind. We could conceive of the game designer as something like the composer of a jazz standard, and the game player as something like a jazz musician, improvising a new performance of that standard each time.[1] Each performance of a jazz standard is informed by, and bears a genetic relationship to, the original – and inherits some of its artistic quality from the original as well. But each performance adds something artistically significant. Each performance of a jazz standard is its own unique work. And in many cases, the artistic contribution of the improvising musician swamps the contribution of the original songwriter. Thelonious Monk's carnivalesque deconstruction of "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes," John Coltrane's brilliant flights of improvisational creation over the simple showtime "My Favorite Things" – when we listen to these performances, most of the aesthetic wonder is to be found in Monk's and Coltrane's improvisational additions, and not the original composition.

What's the right view? I think, as a matter of fact, that there is no single correct view that can encompass all games. Some games are best understood along more traditional, designer-centric lines. Take *The Stanley Parable* (2011). In this narrative video game, the player explores a forking but fixed set of pre-determined narrative paths. There isn't substantial room for player creativity. In *The Stanley Parable,* at least, there seems to be a clear distinction between the artist who designed the game, and the audience, who explores the fixed decision-space made by that designer and contributes little of their own. On the other hand, consider a game like *Microscope* (2011). *Microscope* is a tabletop role-playing game, in which a group of players collectively create the history of the world. The rules of *Microscope* concern the ways in which players take turns to invent new events and insert them into history. But the events in the history are entirely up to the players. Players are constantly improvising new bits of history to link together the previous bits. The player makes a substantial aesthetic contribution to the ecosystem of play – even if they aren't designing the game itself.

Games, I claim, exist on a spectrum, with all sorts of different distributions of artistic responsibility between designer and player. Some games are designer-centric, some are player-centric, and a vast number exist in a complicated middle space – where we find all kinds of different artistic relationships between designer and player.

In the background of this discussion lies a larger debate about the purposes of game-play. According to some, games achieve their artistic purpose when they communicate some more-or-less stable form of meaning. Mary Flanagan, for example, says that games become a worthwhile form of art when they start to deliver social critiques (Flanagan 2009). Ian Bogost suggests that games can be worth our respect when they deliver rhetorical arguments about the world. Bogost praises games like *The McDonald's Game*, which argues that it is impossible to balance the demands of capitalism and environmentalism. That argument is conducted through playable simulation; you play as the CEO of McDonald's and try – and fail – to balance those demands (Bogost 2010: 28–31).[2] In both cases, what's artistically worthwhile about the games are to be retrieved and appreciated by the player – and not created by the player.

According to others, we shouldn't look at games as an art-form at all, and certainly not as a form of communication. As Miguel Sicart says, when we conceive of games inside the art paradigm, we take our task, as players, to be the decoding of the game. Inside the art paradigm, we are only supposed to be discovering the artist's true vision. This, says Sicart, is far too restrictive a view of game-play. Games, says Sicart, are for something entirely different: they are for play. Games are there to encourage free-form creation and anarchic action. In games, we are not

supposed to submit to the artist's authority; we are supposed to invent and re-order the world as free agents (Sicart 2014).[3]

My analysis will also weigh in on this larger debate. I am arguing for the plurality of game-types, which helps demonstrate that there is a plurality of game purposes. Games of different types can support incredibly different social and artistic functions – which can involve, in turn, radically different forms of artistic relationship between designer and player. Games are ontologically diverse because they support an astonishing diversity of purposes.

1 The Designer-centric View

Let's flesh out the end-points of the game spectrum in greater detail. In the *designer-centric* view, the game-designer is the primary artistic contributor. The designer imbues a game with certain artistic qualities, and the audience retrieves those qualities and appreciates them.

The core commitments of the designer-centric view are rarely made explicit, nor are they usually argued for. The designer-centric view usually appears as part of the subterranean conceptual architecture, which informs an entire mode of critical approach. We can see the designer-centric view lurking in the background in discussions like Flanagan's and Bogost's. The presumption, in both such discussions, is that a game has a stable meaning, and that the audience has a valuable experience with the game when they retrieve that meaning. For example: John Sharp praises Flanagan's game *Career Moves* as a worthy example of an artistic game. *Career Moves* is a feminist re-imagining of that old family boardgame classic, *The Game of Life*. But *Career Moves* arbitrarily assigns each player a gendered avatar, and then forces those avatars into stereotypically gendered career paths. Sharp praises the game for its feminist critique of misogyny in the workplace (Sharp 2015: 77–97).

Career Moves fits quite nicely with a designer-centric account. What Sharp takes to be the worthwhile artistic content – the critique of unfairness in the workplace – is baked into the rule-set. The player is an experiential witness, but not a contributor, to that content. This fact is made especially clear by the fact that *Career Moves* – like its parent, *The Game of Life* – is a roll-and-move game, where the player makes almost no decisions but simply takes the rewards and punishments that the game randomly assigns. It is hard to even imagine here what it would look like for the player to make an artistic contribution. This difficulty, however, seems to arise from the fact *The Game of Life*, and its re-imaginings, permit almost no player agency. Perhaps things are different for games that offer substantial player agency – where the player can, for example, control their movements and explore an environment.

But even then, proponents of a designer-centric view have something to say. We can find a particularly sophisticated articulation of a designer-centric view in Dominic McIver Lopes' account of computer art. Computer art, says Lopes, is interactive art whose interactivity comes from the fact that it is run on a computer. Something is interactive, says Lopes, if it prescribes that the actions of its users generate the display (Lopes 2009: 36). Lopes means the category of computer art to include both interactive museum artworks and video game artworks – in both, a user interacts with the artwork. That interaction is processed by the algorithm, which creates displays in response to the user's inputs. Crucially, says Lopes, the sequence of displays generated by a user isn't the artwork. The artwork is the algorithm itself. This is why we need multiple encounters with an interactive work, in order to really appreciate it. One play-through of a game is insufficient to reveal the choice-space; we need to explore the different ways in which the algorithm will respond to our inputs, and so bring the whole space of possibilities into view. The display, and its various responses, are just the means by which the user comes to appreciate the artwork (Lopes 2009: 60).

Notice what has happened here: Lopes' analysis excludes the user-generated part from membership in the core of the artwork about the work – and, thus, excludes the user-generated part

from being a primary bearer of the work's artistic value.[4] The user's actions are interpreted as part of the exploration process of a stable artwork, and not as any form of artistic contribution. Lopes' argument assimilates the relationship between player and game to the familiar relationship between art appreciator and traditional artwork.

Consider Nancy Holt's *Sun Tunnels* – a large-scale installation in the Utah desert. It consists of four very large concrete tunnels, placed in a cross pattern, in a way that aligns with the sunrise and sunset on the summer and winter solstices.[5] *Sun Tunnels* is a piece of land art; its interactions with the environment are part of the work. *Sun Tunnels* looks different on different days, in different weather; the play of light and wind over it creates an ever-changing experience. And the visitor to *Sun Tunnels* will wander around and through the work. *Sun Tunnels* is not like a painting. There is no single "correct" vantage point from which to truly appreciate the work. It is more like a piece of architecture, which must be spatially explored. But the movements of an appreciator around and through *Sun Tunnels* aren't part of artistic qualities of *Sun Tunnels* itself – at least, not according to standard treatments of works like these in art criticism. They are merely the movements by which an appreciator explores the large-scale structure of an artistic work – by which they get a fuller view of that artwork.[6]

According to Lopes, something similar is going on with the movements of a video-game player. They are exploring a choice-space. Their movements and decisions bring into view, for them, the whole structure of the choice-space. Some of this exploration may be of a virtual space, and, thus, precisely analogous to the movements of an appreciator in and around *Sun Tunnels*. Others' exploration concern the logical space of decisions – like, finding out what happens in the story when you help this character or abandon them. But whether we are exploring a virtual space or a narrative decision-tree, the space we are exploring is fixed, and so the *object* of our exploration and appreciation is fixed. And it is an object that has been created by the game designer. It is crucial, in Lopes' view, that the object under consideration isn't, say, the particular narrative generated by a particular player in a particular play-through – it is the space of all possible narratives that might be generated by the algorithm.

And, again, Lopes' view is quite plausible for certain games. *The Stanley Parable* is an interactive story-game. The player guides their avatar through a virtual environment, in which they are confronted with a set of divergent choices. The player has freedom of movement, and the ability to interact with objects, within particular rooms. But, at macro level, the player's process through the game is quite constricted. The large-scale structure of the game confines the player to a set of mostly binary choices – like going through one of two doors to get to the next room, and so to the next chunk of story. The quirk of *The Stanley Parable* is that there is a narrator who tells the player what to do, and the player may choose to disobey. So the player may, it seems, demonstrate their free will by disobeying the narrator's directives. But a player who explores the game fully, and finds all the endings, will discover that, in the end, the shape of the story is quite constrained. In this game, at least, free will turns out to be only an illusion. As Feng Zhu suggests, the intended mode of appreciation for *The Stanley Parable* is to fully explore the possible endings and bring the entire choice-space into view. The true irony of the game only becomes clear once that choice-space, and its limitations, are visible (Zhu 2018). (And this total exploration is made possible by the nature of the game itself. In the original version, there were only six different endings that could be experienced in about an hour.)

But, again, one might suspect that this example is very particular. *The Stanley Parable* is, in a sense, a sophisticated version of those old *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, which offer a rigid, fixed choice-space that a player navigates through by choosing options. Such structures are the best cases for Lopes' view, precisely because the act of choosing from an explicit menu of options involves very little creativity or improvisation on the part of the player. They are a minimum of agency – perhaps, one might say, even a simulacrum of real agency. But not all games are like that.

And one might even worry that highly constricted games like *Career Moves* and *The Stanley Parable* – which offer very little in the way of player agency – are more popular with game scholars and game critics precisely because they fit in so nicely with the traditional art paradigm, and so are easy to write about using the familiar and well-developed tools of literary and art criticism.

2 Some Case Studies in Indie Role-playing

Let's take a look at the opposite end of the spectrum – at some games that seem to highlight player agency and support player creativity. Though there are many examples of this in the realm of boardgames and computer games, I think some of the clearest examples come from the world of tabletop role-playing games. These are also some of the most interesting contemporary game designs – mechanically innovative, brilliantly designed, and wonderful to play. Let me discuss three examples in some detail – not only because the games are utterly delightful, but because those details will matter in the ensuing analysis.

All three examples come from a specific world: the contemporary world of independent tabletop role-playing games. That community had a founding moment in a bulletin-board forum called *The Forge*, where a number of role-playing die-hards gathered and began to discuss their difficulties with the dominant role-playing system of the time – *Dungeons and Dragons* (1974) – and its various descendants and derivatives. Many of them said that they started playing *D&D* in hopes of high adventure, epic storytelling, and collaborative creativity. But the mechanics of the *D&D* rule-set tend to push players into dull slogs of repetitive killing and shopping. These mechanics are very satisfying for some players – especially those who love to finely optimize their killing ability – but can turn out to be very dull for other players who had hoped for something more narratively inventive (Edwards 2001 and 2002).

What followed from these worries were a series of increasingly radical experiments in role-playing game design. Designers hoped to create mechanics that would support collaborative storytelling, player creativity, and narrative improvisation. One diagnosis of *D&D*'s weaknesses is to look at its historical source. *D&D*'s rules were originally derived from wargaming – specifically, the simulation of hidden sappers digging under siege walls. They were intended for fine-grained combat simulation, and not for fostering creative story-telling (Peterson 2012).

One of the key figures in this community of role-playing experimenters is Vincent Baker. His strikingly innovative and influential game designs arose, in part, from an attempt to merge *D&D*'s mechanical specificity with ideas from the world of improvisational theater. In particular, his designs borrow techniques from improv comedy, building them into the formal mechanics of the game. In improv comedy, the basic rule of thumb is supposed to be, "Yes, and…" – which posits means that improv participants must usually accept the other participant's suggestions and build on them, rather than refusing or undermining them. In Baker's hands, this becomes the dictum, for the game-master: "Say yes or roll the dice." This means that the game-master should, as a rule, assent to the player's suggestions and wishes – except when they think it would be more interesting to engage the game's mechanics for risky exercises in skill. And every roll of the dice can introduce new and unexpected elements into the game.

This principle, Baker explains, is meant to encourage deep narrative collaboration (Baker 2004; Baker and Baker 2016). If one has played *D&D*, one is probably familiar with how game sessions often go: the game-master creates a world and a plot ahead of time. In order to keep the game on those rails, the game-master will then often balk at taking up any player ideas that fail to fit that pre-created vision. Instead, Baker's dictum encourages the game-master to take-up all the players' suggestions and creations – to let the players, as much as possible, be co-creators of the narrative. And the game-master is supposed to make the players roll for results only when rolling would be interesting – when failure would be as narratively interesting as success.

Deep collaboration is baked into the rules of Vincent and Meguey Baker's RPG masterpiece, *Apocalypse World* (2nd ed., 2016) – possibly the most important design in contemporary indie role-playing. One of the subtle, but utterly crucial, mechanical innovations of *Apocalypse World* lies in how it flips the ontology of the world – how it gives players a direct and constant hand in creating the world. We can see this flipped ontology in the way that various perception and intelligence checks work in *AW* versus *D&D*. In *D&D*, a player may decide to search a part of the dungeon for a possible trap-door. The game-master asks the player to roll against their Perception skill. If the player rolls well and the game-master had, indeed, placed a door there ahead of time, then the player will find the door. But even if they roll well, they will only find a door if it was placed there ahead of time. The player is merely navigating a world pre-prepared by the game-master.

In *AW*, there is an entirely different relationship between player action and world creation. Perhaps the player is stuck in a desperate situation. Suppose they are trapped in a cave, in an apparent dead-end, with a gang of cannibals advancing. The player rolls against their intelligence attribute, Sharp. If they succeed, they get to pick from a list of questions. The questions include "What's my best escape route?", "Which enemy is most vulnerable to me?" and "Who's in control here?" And when they earn such a question, the game-master must give them a useful answer – and typically they do so by *inventing a new part of the world* to fill out that answer. For example: say the player succeeds in their Sharp roll and asks about an escape route. The game-master likely had no such escape route in mind, but the mechanics force them to introduce an escape route into the world. Perhaps they create a hidden trap-door or a half-working bulldozer, lying beneath some rubble in the dead-end. The player asks about a vulnerable enemy and the game-master must invent one – like maybe a cannibal leader who is sensitive to bright lights. One player archetype, The Brainer, has access to an entirely different set of questions, which they can inflict on non-player characters and player-characters alike: "What was your character's lowest moment?", "For what does your character crave forgiveness, and from whom?", and "In what ways are your character's mind and soul vulnerable?"

Notice the way that these questions fuel the collaboration. The questions let the players *look* at a particular part of the world and, in doing so, force the game-master to fill in that part of the world. They are a mechanism baked into the rules that lets the player's interest drive the direction and shape of the narrative in a deep, structural way. The result is a kind of responsive, cooperative world-building. The game-master creates a threat. The players ask questions about the threat, and suddenly the game-master has to fill in parts of the world, according to the player's indicated interests – furnishing an escape route, or a leadership structure to manipulate, or filling in the antagonist's motivations, vulnerabilities, and cravings. Each of these features creates new opportunities for the players. The players then improvise new actions in response to the evolving scenario, and the game-master invents new roadblocks to their actions. Then the players ask new questions about those roadblocks, forcing the game-master to fill in more parts of the world that players are interested in, and on and on.

The *AW* rule-set has inspired many derivates. One of the most interesting is Jason Morningstar's *Blades in the Dark* (2017). *Blades in the Dark* is set in a steampunk, post-apocalyptic world, where the players inhabit a Victorian-esque city, walled-off from demon-haunted wastes. In this world, there are great heroes, powerful wizards, and terrifying demon-hunters. But the players do not get to be those great powers. The players are, instead, a bunch of low-life cons, robbers, and thieves. They break into the towers of vastly more powerful wizards and demon-hunters and pilfer their valuables. *Blades* is *Ocean's 11*, but with gnomes and talking spiders – and Victorian orphanages run by half-demons.

The core of the game is a wonderfully innovative set of temporal mechanics that perfectly fits the cons-and-thieves theme. It works like this: the players decide that they will break in to, say, Gorrod the Terrible's secret vault. The *characters* spend a month planning for the job, but the

players don't. The players answer a couple of quick questions about their general approach and then the game skips them forward over that whole month and cuts immediately to, say, the characters slipping in through the skylight. Now the characters face impossible odds – vastly more powerful forces are arrayed against them. All they have on their side is their incredible, thorough planning. But, remember: the players haven't actually done any of that planning. The characters have, off-screen. The game then simulates that pre-planning with a brilliant mechanism. Each character start with ten stamina points. And when the characters get into trouble, the players can spend those stamina points on *flashbacks*, where they jump back in time and role-play out *how they prepared for this very contingency*. A giant throws you off a roof – have a flashback to when you paid some street-urchins to stretch out a net for you just in case. Trapped in a jail cell? Have a flashback to a week ago, when you followed the head jailor and discovered his infidelities. Now pop out of the flashback, with all the right blackmail materials on hand.

In one game we played, a thief was flung from a ship into roiling, storm-tossed seas. My spouse, who was playing that thief, called for a flashback in which she had, two weeks before, gone to parlay with the Mermaid Queen who ruled those waters. (The Mermaid Queen had not, until that moment, existed in the game – the Queen was invented by my spouse as a way out of this particular dire circumstance.) My spouse's intention had been to make an ally of the Mermaid Queen in the past, to rescue her once we returned to the future, when she fell into the sea. But due to some unexpected twists and failed roll in the flashback, she ended up first seducing the Queen, and then jilting that Queen. So when we popped back to the game-present, it turned out that her thief character was falling into the seas, only to be snatched up by a screaming-mad, jilted ex-lover of a Mermaid Queen, along with her army of enraged mermaid fanatics.

What's crucial in this case is the interplay between the game mechanics and player creativity. This is not free-form player invention. The rules push the players to improvise in very specific ways. They can improvise by having flashbacks to their planning. The specific content of those flashbacks is the result of wild player improvisation. But those improvisations come in response to specific obstacles that have been generated by the rules. And the improvisations are still constrained by the rules – since players still have to follow the rules and roll for their various attempts inside the flashbacks. Those rolls create quite a bit of emergent chaos, which conditions further creativity. I don't think anybody involved – player or game-master – would have thought, given total creative freedom, of introducing a jilted Mermaid Queen. But the game rules forced the player to make a series of rolls, and the game rules indicated that failed rolls had to have a negative consequence chosen from a specific menu, so the game-master (me) ended up improvising an over-possessive Mermaid Queen who wanted to keep the thief in the Queen's underwater love-den for all eternity.

Finally, consider Ben Robbins' *Microscope* (2011). *Microscope* is a collaborative role-playing game of history building. The players designate some chunk of imaginary history to explore (The Flight of Humanity from the AI, The Twilight of the Elves, etc.). They explore history "fractally" (as the game puts it) by creating large-scale Epochs (The First Era of Prosperity, The War with the Dwarves, The Famine Years, The Second Nixon Presidency), and then creating Events within those Epochs (The Siege of Lillehammer; Nixon's Trial; The Wedding of the Elf Queen), and then creating Scenes within those Events. A player triggers a Scene by asking a question such as, "Why did the Elf Queen decide to marry her nemesis, the Dwarf General?" and naming some characters. Players then volunteer to take on various characters, and then they improvise a scene until they discover the answer to that question. In general, players are free to jump around in history, adding new Epochs, Events, and Scenes in any order.

The game works shockingly well. Players will usually begin by creating some scattered Epochs and Events with suggestive names – some obviously related to each other, some not. Questions will then arise. The elves are at war with the dwarves here, but later, their leaders are married here. How did that happen? Nixon was president here, but later, he is the slave-puppet of the

emergent AI overlords. From whence came his downfall? And key to this all is the game's core mechanism – of resolving such questions through lightning rounds of improvisational theater. Players are playing to find out, to discover, how history goes – and they find those answers in their own collaborative improvisation, as guided by the directive to fit it into the bits of history that they have already previously improvised.

3 Player-centric Design

These games are all excellent examples of player-centric design. These are examples in which the player, by design, makes a significant creative contribution of some artistic value to the game-play ecosystem. Indeed, the fact that players make some contribution here is so clear and obvious, that I will not argue for it any further. What's worth exploring, still, are questions about how game design features drive player-centrism.

First: in player-centric games, what is the relationship between the designer's artistic contribution and the players'? Paul Crowther argues that games are unfinished works only finished in play. The game designer and the player, that is, are artistic collaborators, who work together to create a finished product (Crowther 2008). But Crowther's view elides the substantial difference between game and play-through – and ignores the fact that we can evaluate games and their playthroughs as separate entities with distinct artistic value.

In games, there are very different objects to which we can attribute artistic merit. In *The Stanley Parable* and in those old *Choose Your Own Adventure* books, we mostly attribute artistic merit to the designed game object – the rules, the computer game, the interactive book. In *Microscope*, *Apocalypse World*, and *Blades in the Dark*, we can attribute aesthetic merit to the designed game object, but we can also attribute an independent aesthetic merit to the player's contributions. For such games, then, there are two distinct loci for artistic merit and aesthetic evaluation – the designed game, and the play-throughs of that game. Notice that we can provide separate evaluations of a game-design and of specific play-throughs of that design. I can comprehensibly say that *Blades in the Dark* is a brilliant game-design, but that my first few sessions of it were kind of sloggy and aimless because my play-group hadn't quite figured it out yet. There are, of course, relationships between those evaluations. Part of what it is to be a good game design, of this sort, is that it makes good play-throughs more likely. The game design, in fact, helps shape and structure those play-throughs.

The existence of dual focuses of evaluation should be extremely familiar from elsewhere in artistic life. We can evaluate Beethoven's String Quartet op. 110, and we can separately evaluate performances of it. We should be careful, however, about taking this analogy too far. Berys Gaut has claimed that game players perform a game just as a classical musician performs a classical composition (Gaut 2010: 143). But, as Andrew Kania persuasively argues, Gaut's analysis misses many of the crucial differences between game-playing and musical performance. A musical performance of a composition, says Kania, involves the performer's critical interpretation of that composition. The performer must have some take on the composition, and then try to communicate that take to the audience. But, says Kania, there is very little reason to think that anything of that sort happens with game-players. Game-players aren't usually thinking of an interpretation of the game, nor are they intending to communicate that interpretation to some other audience – even if that audience is themselves. They are usually just trying to win (Kania 2018).

Kania is thinking here of more straightforwardly competitive games, where the game-player is simply trying to overcome obstacles.[7] The player of a role-playing game is not only trying to win, usually. Especially in the narratively-oriented games I've described, players are often self-consciously interested in the generation of an aesthetically interesting, rich narrative – even if that doesn't improve their in-game score. But even then, Kania's point holds. The *AW* player

isn't providing an interpretation *of* the rules. The rules are, instead, triggering the improvisatory generation of a new narrative. The point here isn't to deny the player's artistic contribution. Kania is simply refusing the precise mapping of the designer/player relationship to the composer/performer relationship. And this seems entirely right. We should not be so eager to assimilate the game-playing ecosystem to other artistic ecosystems. And we should be open to the possibility that artistic value and artistic responsibility, in games, does not map comfortably onto the artistic value of some other form of art. Games might turn out to be artistically distinctive.

So let's look at exactly how artistic contributions work, in games. In a role-playing game, the player generates a narrative. There are two different sites of artistic and aesthetic value in that process. There can be valuable aesthetic qualities in the *product* of play – the generated narrative – but there can also be valuable aesthetic qualities in the *process* of generating that narration. That is: the player can creatively generate a free-standing artistic object – a story – but they can also find aesthetic qualities in their own process of creative generation itself. Their creative acts can be aesthetically valuable, just as can the products of those acts. And, I suspect, many are drawn to participate in role-playing games, rather than simply reading novels and watching movies, because they value not just good narratives, but the experience of creating a narrative – because they value the act of collaboratively improvising a story.

It is important to notice, here, how different games are from many traditional art forms. Much of the aesthetic wonder emerges in the activity of the player in response to the game, rather than simply in the game itself, as a stable and designed object.

I've argued elsewhere that there are two very distinctive forms of art. There are the object arts and the process arts. The *object arts* are those arts in which an artist creates some stable object – a novel, a painting, a movie – and the audience appreciates that very same object. In the *process arts*, the artist creates a stable object, and the stable object calls forth further actions from the audience. And then the audience appreciates the aesthetic qualities of their own actions. Process arts include many games, but also improvised social dances, cooking, and social food rituals like hot pots. In the social tango, for instance, dancers don't dance for an external eye – they dance for the experience of being improvising dancers, of the aesthetic joys of generating their own dance moves on the fly (Dujovne 2011: 5–6). In the object arts, the audience appreciates the beauty, thrill, horror, or comedy in the external object. But in the process arts, the external object initiates and guides the audience's activity – and it is the audience's own actions that are beautiful, elegant, dramatic, or comically clumsy. The process arts are rich in aesthetic value – and they are quite common in human life. But they have been profoundly neglected by high art culture and by theorists of the arts (Nguyen 2020b).

Note that the object/process art distinction is not the distinction between static and dynamic artworks. A painting is an object art – but so is a theatrical performance. A performance of *King Lear* is an external entity, created through some collaboration of a scriptwriter and theatrical performers. The audience admires that external entity, and attributes aesthetic properties and makes aesthetic judgments of that external entity – the performance – rather than their own activity. Theatrical performances are object arts. Arcade games and rock climbing, on the other hand, are excellent examples of process arts. The point of so many arcade games is to experience the thrilling perfection of your own timing, executing a perfect sequence of jumps and slides. For so many rock climbers, the point is to experience their own body becoming elegant, precise – to find beauty in their own movements (Nguyen 2017b).

Thinking about the process arts makes clear the important distinction between the artist's work and the attentive focus. The *artist's work* is the stable object created by the artist. The *attentive focus* is that to which the audience is supposed to pay attention and aesthetically appreciate. This distinction is hidden in the object arts, because the artist's work and attentive focus are one and the same. Dorothy Baker wrote the poignant, biting, delicately twisty novel *Cassandra at the Wedding*. We, the audience, are supposed to read it, and discover in it her wonderfully sharp portrait

of Cassandra, the novel's brilliant but broken and unreliable narrator. Baker's novel is the artistic object and the attentive focus. We, the readers, appreciate the details and the character work that Baker put into the novel. But in the process arts, artist's work and attentive focus can come apart. When I play the brain-wrecking puzzle game *Baba is You*, the artist's work is the game, but my aesthetic appreciation is of the workings of my own mind – on my frustration as I flail at the puzzles, and at the extraordinary feeling of epiphanic unlocking when I finally see the solution.

Many games are pure process arts, as I've argued elsewhere (Nguyen 2020a: 101–66). But the role-playing games I've discussed here are, I think, incredibly complex hybrids of process and object arts. Inside the game, the players go through the process of creating a narrative. The narrative itself is an object art, which can be appreciated by anybody, including people entirely outside the game. (I myself listen to a number of excellent podcasts, consisting of live and unedited recordings of good role-players. Somehow, role-players improvising their way through a story often yield far more inventive results than the best efforts of major Hollywood studios.) But the process of creation can itself also be elegant and thrilling. There is an aesthetic quality to the process of invention – to the feeling of one's creative mind in full flight. Role-playing games are a process art, where the process is of creating an object art. The game is to create an artwork – but part of the aesthetic glory lies is in the creative process itself.

Perhaps an analogy will help elucidate this further. Consider the complex aesthetic potential in a cookbook recipe. Our cooking of it can have aesthetic qualities in two locations: in the process of cooking itself, and in the finished dish. And those came come wildly apart. Many a fancy-high-end scientific cookbook I've used results in a miserable and annoying cooking process, but yields perfect results. While other, homier cookbooks often yield pleasant and elegant cooking processes, but only a decent dish (Nguyen 2018).

Role-playing games have some artistic merit in the rules themselves, but also help shape aesthetically valuable narratives in play – and to shape aesthetically rich *processes* of generating those narratives. They are player-centric design insofar as they encourage valuable aesthetic contributions by the player. Those contributions can emerge in two locations – in the process and in the output (when there is an output). That duality is quite clear in role-playing games: there is aesthetic value both in the player's process of generating the narrative, and in the output of that process – the narrative itself.

4 A View of Creative Contribution

How do we assign artistic responsibility, then, between designer and player? One simple theory is that the game designer is responsible for artistic qualities of the game itself – the rules, the board, the virtual environment – and the players are responsible for the artistic qualities in each individual playing. But things are far more tangled than that. For one thing, the players' creative activity is profoundly shaped by the rules. In *Blades in the Dark*, the players' bursts of creativity are pushed down a very specific channel, by the very powerful – but very focused – flashback mechanism. In *AW*, players can use questions to explore the world – but the permitted questions are very specific. The rules force the players to choose from a very limited menu of options, which channels their world-creating ability down some pre-specified and thematically appropriate paths. In *Microscope*, the players are permitted wild bursts of creativity, but only in response to a specific question asked so as to connect and explain moments that have already been entered into the history. Player creativity is not free-form in these cases; it is constrained, shaped, and sent down specific channels, by the rules of the game.

And furthermore, it is hard to even think about the artistic merit of a game, without thinking about how that game shapes play and how satisfying play-throughs are likely to arise. Game rules are not elegant as some kind of free-standing entity. They are functionally elegant; they are elegant when they give rise to wonderful play (Nguyen 2020a: 116–8).

To help us sort out artistic responsibilities here, let's start with Nick Zangwill's account of artistic creation (Zangwill 2007). He suggests that we assign artistic responsibility to whoever had the *aesthetic insight*. The aesthetic insight is the insight the arrangement of certain non-aesthetic properties will give rise to certain aesthetic properties – and who imbues the artwork with those non-aesthetic properties for that purpose.[8] For example, Baker's aesthetic insight was that she could give *Cassandra at the Wedding* a particularly delicious texture, by creating a story in which the narrator withheld from the reader key information about why she was so upset about her sister's wedding – and to let that information leak out at the edges.

Who, then, has the aesthetic insight? In the role-playing cases, I think both designer and player have aesthetic insights, but of very different sorts. The player has specific insights into the process of improvised storytelling – that having their character explode with rage here would be funnier; that the dramatic tension would be heightened if their character fell into silence and refused to divulge their pained past; etc. The designer also has aesthetic insights – but they are about how a certain arrangement of rules will create certain lovely player experiences of creation and encourage the formation of certain kinds of narrative. Morningstar's flashback rules, in *Blades in the Dark*, work so well because the rules impose such severe limits on them. The rules demand that you spend stamina points to have flashbacks – and force you to spend more stamina points to have more unusual flashbacks. Ordinary planning, of the sort we could reasonably expect that any respectable thief would perform, requires only one stamina point, but flashbacks that require strange coincidences or unlikely circumstances require more stamina points. So the mechanic injects the narrative with suspense – and injects the process of creating the narrative with a fair amount of pressure. In a typical session, players will feel vastly powerful when they are fresh and loaded with stamina points. But as they use up their stamina, things get more tense. Players start to hoard their stamina points, and then try to get an enormous amount done with their few remaining flashbacks. That forces the players into a particular kind of creative problem-solving – thinking of some cheap flashback that can get everything done that needs to get done. The idea is the player's, but the conditions that inform that idea – and the mechanics that create the narrative tension in the background – arise from the aesthetic insight of the game designer. In particular, we might say here, the inventive details of the narrative are up to the player – like my spouse's insight that trying to seduce a Mermaid Queen would be an excellent bit of comedy. But the quality of *dramatic tension* that shows up reliably in *Blades in the Dark* is the result of Morningstar's aesthetic insight into what sort of narratives his rules will create, and the feel of generating those narratives – like the dramatic effect from the rule concerning the expenditure of stamina points.

So Zangwill's account helps us to see how the game designer can have a particular kind of aesthetic insight, in which they shape the player's aesthetic experience by shaping the rules of the game.[9] And it helps us see how game-players can shape the aesthetic insight into the aesthetic *product* of their play – such as the produced narrative. But it strikes me that Zangwill's account, and others like it, leave out something very important. Zangwill's account demands that aesthetic responsibility track aesthetic intention. An artist must see *ahead of time* that some arrangement of non-aesthetic features will lead to some aesthetic outcome, and they must bring about those features *to reach that aesthetic outcome*.

But a huge range of player-contributed aesthetic value doesn't look like that. Consider the way in which many of the aesthetic qualities emerge in the *process* of play. When I am absorbed in a game of chess, I figure out a perfect move to escape this horrible trap. In reflection, the arc of my mind's deliberation is wonderfully dramatic, especially when it ends in a moment of gorgeous epiphanic insight. When a basketball player makes a perfect pass, the movement is dripping with aesthetic qualities – with elegance and grace and power. But the basketball player didn't do it for the sake of those aesthetic qualities, and I didn't figure out my chess move guided by an insight into how my mind might move *in order to be beautiful*. The basketball player is absorbed in the details of movement

and collision; my chess brain is absorbed in figuring out the possible moves and counter-moves. The aesthetic features of the process of play often arise unintentionally, as a side-effect of purely instrumental play. (At the same time, they often arise intentionally, as the intended aesthetic effect of a game designer's arrangement of the rules and environment of the game.)

But, although those aesthetic features aren't brought about by an intentional aesthetic insight, those aesthetic features are surely attributable, in significant part, to the player. Serena Williams' astonishing displays of athletic prowess – her athletic beauty – are surely the result of her training, athleticism, and ability. The aesthetic satisfaction found in the role-player's sudden burst of creative invention is surely partially attributable to that player's creative capacities (and partially to the game-designer's rules). The gracefulness with which a *Super Mario Brothers* speed-runner hits those jumps with astonishing precision is surely due, in significant part, to their intensely trained skill. (And also due, in significant part, to the people that designed *SMB*'s physics and levels, to create a platform for likelier grace.)

Zangwill's account of artistic responsibility arises, I think, around a traditional conception of the artist as the intentional creator of aesthetic qualities. But it cannot capture some significant part of the aesthetic responsibility of the player. Something very different is happening with the game-player in play. The elegance of their actions is a form of functional beauty – the beauty of the action arises from how well it fulfills its function (Parsons and Carlson 2009). Functional beauty arises from actors that are focused on performing some function well; they are aesthetic side-effects of the action. And such aesthetic side-effects may be our purpose in engaging in the activity as a whole, but they are not the product of intentional focus, in the moment, on producing that aesthetic effect.[10] Perhaps, one might respond, Zangwill's account is of *artistic* responsibility, and the production of aesthetic side-effects is not a matter of artistry, but something else. Even if that were true, those side-effects are aesthetically valuable, and are attributable to the player. The player is making an aesthetic contribution, even if it is, by some definitions, not strictly an artistic one.[11]

5 Resolving the Views

What have we learned? Some games are best conceived of as designer-centric. The artistic responsibility lies with the game-designer. The player appreciates those games, but does not make an artistic contribution to that gaming ecosystem. The clearest cases of designer-centric games are those in which the player's agency is restricted; there aren't really actions available to the player that might plausibly count as creative.

Other games are best understood as more player-centric. The player makes a significant artistic or aesthetic contribution, both in their artistic output and in their creative process of generating that output. Player-centric games typically create enormous room for player agency and creativity, and encourage rich improvisations as part of play. I've chosen to highlight examples from tabletop role-playing, but these aren't the only examples. Boardgames like *Spyfall* (2014) create rich social interactions, in which players must lie, dissemble, and invent, to manipulate each other. Computer games like *Defense of the Ancients* (2003) create a rich strategic space in which players must innovate strategies and tactics, often on the fly, to cope with difficult opposition. Games can create space for substantial player creativity, because games are an art form that centers player agency.[12]

Notes

1 Berys Gaut offers an account along these lines (Gaut 2010: 143–5). The contours of the idea are, however, commonplace; I have seen echoes of this approach in conversations between students and in online discussion forums.

2 For further discussion of these approaches, see Nguyen (2017a: 6–8 and 2020a: 102–4).

3 I've offered a response to Sicart in Nguyen (2019c and 2020a: 121–40). My response, though, is targeted at Sicart's claims that *all* games have the function of promoting free-form play. I argue that some games are best understood as communications of modes of agency. But my argument is entirely compatible with the view that *some* games are for promoting free-form play.
4 Berys Gaut has offered a criticism of Lopes' account of interactivity, and a suggested tweak (Gaut 2010). See also Kania (2018) for a useful summary of the Lopes/Gaut dispute, weighing in on Gaut's side. I favor Lopes' account, but the complexities do not matter for the present discussion.
5 https://umfa.utah.edu/land-art/sun-tunnels (accessed October 26, 2020).
6 Jenefer Robinson offers a succinct account of this standard view of architectural appreciation – though she criticizes it for leaving out the proprioceptive appreciation of the moving architectural inhabitant (Robinson 2012: 343).
7 I think such games are well described by Bernard Suits' account of games as voluntary attempts to overcome obstacles (Suits 2014; Nguyen 2019a), but I do not think that Suits' account exhausts all games, as I argued in Nguyen (2019b).
8 A longer discussion of adapting Zangwill's account to the process arts can be found in Nguyen (2020b: 15–7). The ensuing application to role-playing games is new to this chapter, and I think exposes some oversimplifications in my earlier discussion. See especially the discussion of the athlete's contribution, below.
9 For a much more thorough discussion of this point, see Nguyen (2020a: 141–66).
10 For a further discussion of how we may pursue aesthetic goals in the large-scale, but not the moment, with games, see Nguyen (2020a: 52–120).
11 The distinction between artistic and aesthetic value has become quite fraught recently, and cannot be untangled here. For more discussion, see Lopes (2011); Huddleston (2012); Hanson (2013).
12 Nguyen (2019a and 2020a).

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